

Divergence

A Genuine Kindness – Volume II

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PART ONE

The Zamarripas had lived on Avenue L for three generations and the house had been rebuilt twice under them, and the second rebuild had raised it, so that what had been a front step was now eleven of them and what had been a yard was now a bay with a concrete floor that stayed cool all summer and held everything nobody could throw away.

Perla had married into it. She had grown up four streets over in a house that had not been raised, and had watched from her bedroom window through two of the bad autumns while the water came up Sixty-Eighth and stopped, both times, about where her mother said it would. She had not thought about that in years. It came back to her in the March of 2588 for no reason she could name, standing in the bay with a basket against her hip, looking at the concrete and thinking that she had never once in her life been afraid in that house and that this was probably worth something.

Then Ximena came down the eleven steps two at a time and said the thing about the trip, and Perla said no, and the afternoon went a way afternoons did not go.

. . .

It was not the no. She had said no before and would say it again and Ximena at fifteen took a no about as well as anybody's fif-

teen-year-old, which is to say she took it and put it somewhere and brought it back out later at a better angle. That was ordinary. Perla had been fifteen.

What was not ordinary was that it did not stop.

Perla went inside and put the basket down and started on the peppers and expected — she could not have said she expected it, because you do not expect the thing that has happened every day of your life, you simply proceed as though the floor is there — she proceeded as though within the quarter hour the shape of the afternoon would come back round. It always did. You said the hard thing and then there was a stretch where nobody said anything, and then the room found something for you both to do, or the light changed, or one of you remembered a thing that needed saying about somebody else entirely, and the no was still a no but it was no longer sitting in the middle of the kitchen with its coat on.

The quarter hour went. Ximena was in her room with the door not quite shut, worse than shut. Perla did the peppers and started on the rest and the thing did not come back round.

At six Rufino came in off the shift smelling of the channel and asked what was wrong, and Perla said nothing was wrong, and heard herself say it, and knew as she said it that it was the first outright untruth she had told him in about two years and that she had told it because she had no other sentence available. There was nothing wrong. Nothing had gone wrong. A woman had told her daughter no about a trip to the coast with the Salinas girl's family and the daughter had gone to her room.

"She's sulking," Rufino said.

"She's not sulking."

"She looks like sulking."

"She's been in there three hours."

He took the top off a bottle of something and stood with it and did not drink from it. "About the coast."

"About the coast."

"Well," he said. "It's the coast."

And then he went and knocked on the door and said something Perla did not catch and came back and said she was fine, and she was not fine, and they ate, all four of them, because in that house you ate at the table and had done since Rufino's father's time and Elodia would have said something if they had not.

Elodia said something anyway. She said, halfway through, to nobody: "In my day you would have got the belt for that face."

"Mamá."

"I'm only saying what I remember."

She was not, and Perla knew she was not, and there was no way at all to establish it. Elodia had been born in 2509 into a district that had been under the gradient for two hundred years before her mother was born, and whatever she remembered about the belt she had got it from somewhere that was not her own kitchen. Perla had stopped arguing about it in 2585. You did not argue with a woman of seventy-nine about her own childhood.

After, when the plates were done and Ximena had gone up again, Perla stood in the kitchen with her hands on the edge of the sink and found that she was tired in a way that did not match the day. She had taught a full day, come home, argued for nine seconds with her daughter, and cooked. That was Tuesday. That was every Tuesday of her adult life.

She went up. Ximena was on the bed with her feet against the wall, as she had lain since she was nine.

"You can go next year," Perla said.

"I know."

"That's not what I came up for."

Ximena did not say anything.

Perla sat on the end of the bed. The room was warm and the window was open and down the street somebody was running a saw. She could not think of a single thing to say that would move it, and the not being able was so unfamiliar that she sat there for some time trying to locate what was missing, as a tongue goes to a tooth.

In the end she said: "We're all right."

Ximena turned her head and looked at her.

"Yeah," she said. "I know."

And that was all, and Perla went down, and the saw went on until about nine.

. . .

There is a thing that happens to a teacher in the first week of a year, and it is not the children. It is the pattern of the children. You come in and by the Thursday you know which four will be a problem and which two of the four are actually the same problem wearing different shoes, and the knowing arrives on its own without your having done anything to earn it.

Perla had been at the district school on Lyons for nineteen years. She had the second-years, which meant seven-year-olds, which meant that whatever was going to be true about a child's next decade was already in the room and mostly still fixable. She had a good room, north-facing, with a bank of low cupboards along one wall that she had filled over two decades with things that had no educational purpose whatsoever, and she believed — she had never had to defend the belief, because nobody had ever asked her to — that about a third of her job was conducted through those cupboards.

In the September of 2588 the pattern did not arrive.

She noticed it first as a failure of the mornings. A room of seven-year-olds at nine has a temperature and the temperature is not a metaphor; you can walk in and feel whether the day is going to be work. For nineteen years the temperature at nine had been, on the great majority of days, mild. There were bad mornings. A bad morning was a Monday after something in a child's house, or the first cold snap, or a boy who had not eaten. Those you dealt with, and they were the job.

That September the mornings were not mild and they were not bad in any of the ways she had a name for. They were unsettled. The room did not come together. She would get them down and something would go through them like weather and they would be up again, and she would look for the cause the way she had looked for nineteen years and the cause would not be there.

The clearest of it was a girl called Yesenia Alaniz, who was seven and who cried.

Children cry. Perla had had perhaps six hundred children through that room and she could have told you, and would have been right, that the crying was almost never about the thing it was about. What was different about Yesenia was not the frequency, two or three times a week and unremarkable, but the fact that it did not stop on its own. Perla would sit with her, and Perla was good at this, and the sitting would work, and then twenty minutes later it would be back. Something had been taken out of the middle. There had always been a stretch, after the sitting, when whatever had been wrong went quiet by itself and let the child re-join the room, and with Yesenia in that autumn the stretch was not there. Perla had to do all of it, every time, by hand.

She raised it in the first week of October with Doreen Pichardo, who ran the school and had run it for fourteen years and was the most competent person Perla had ever worked beside.

"You've noticed it," Doreen said.

"I've noticed something."

"Everyone's noticed something." Doreen had a way of sitting back that meant she was going to say the true thing rather than the useful one. "Fourth-year are worse. Serrato's had two fights and she's never had a fight."

"Fights."

"Actual. Hands. The Tijerina boy and one of the twins, in the yard, and then the same two again nine days later, which is the part I keep looking at." She turned a cup round on the desk without drinking from it. "The second one is the part. First one's just boys. Second one means the first one didn't finish."

"What did you do?"

"What we're supposed to do. Sat them down, separated the timetable, put a note in. It didn't finish either." Doreen looked at the window. "I put it in the district report. I put it in as a staffing observation, because there isn't a field for what it actually is."

"What is it actually?"

"I don't know," Doreen said. "That's the observation."

The district acknowledged the report in the November, thanked her for it, and asked whether additional pastoral hours would assist. Doreen said yes, and got them, and they did assist, and she said as much in the following report, and the district closed the item.

Perla thought about it on the walk home, which took nine minutes and was down Lyons and left and over, past the church and the two shops and the yard where they had been building something for three years. She had a theory by the time she got in.

The theory was the intake boundary. It had come through in 2586 and had shifted about sixty families in and about forty out, and had been argued about at the time in a hall with poor acoustics, and Perla had supported it and had said so publicly and had been right to. The families it brought in were from the streets north of the rail cut, and the streets north of the rail cut had a different housing stock and a different age profile, and it was entirely reasonable — it was more than reasonable, it was the only visible variable — that a school which had absorbed sixty families in two years might be finding its second and fourth years unsettled.

She sat with the theory over the peppers. It accounted for the fourth-years. It accounted for the corridors. It accounted for the fact that the older staff felt it more than the younger, since the older staff had a longer baseline to feel it against.

It did not account for her own room, because thirteen of her twenty-two second-years had been in the catchment before 2586 and Yesenia Alaniz was one of them, and her family had been on Sixty-Eighth for four generations.

Perla did not notice that it did not account for her own room. She had wanted a theory and this was the one that had come, and it was a good theory, and she was tired.

She held it for two years.

. . .

The channel does not stop. Rufino had said that to Ximena when she was about six and she had repeated it to a teacher as though it were scripture, and it had come back round to him at a parents' evening and he had been pleased with himself for a fortnight.

Freight coordination at the eastern terminals meant that when two things wanted the same berth at the same hour, one of them

did not get it, and somebody decided which, and for four hundred years the somebody had almost never been a person. The berths allocated. The allocations arrived. Where two allocations were in genuine conflict the conflict had a way of not surviving until morning — a vessel would have found a reason to come in late, or a load would have been split, or the thing that had looked like a collision at four in the afternoon would be, by seven, two separate and adequate arrangements that nobody could quite remember agreeing to.

Rufino had done the job for twenty-two years and could have told you, if you had asked him in a certain mood, that the job was mostly waiting for problems to stop being problems. He would have said it as a joke against himself. He would have meant it as a description of competence . His competence: the knowing-when-not-to-act that he had built up over two decades and was quietly proud of, and that had made him at forty-eight the man the younger coordinators came to when something looked bad at four in the afternoon.

There was a boy on the desk that autumn called Danilo who had been there five months and who came over at about half four one afternoon with a screen and a face.

"Berth four and berth five," Danilo said. "Both of them at nine tomorrow and both of them want the same crane."

Rufino looked at it for a while. Then he handed the screen back.

"Leave it till the morning."

"But they're —"

"I know what they are." He was already reaching for something else. "Come and find me at seven if it's still there."

Danilo came and found him at seven and it was not still there; one of the two had gone to berth six of its own accord for a reason nobody had put in the record, and the crane was free, and the boy

looked at Rufino with something Rufino had seen on perhaps forty faces over twenty-two years and had never got tired of.

That was the October. It had been true every time he had said it.

In the November of 2588 he did not leave it.

The conflict was two dry-bulk arrivals wanting berth nine inside the same two-hour window, one of them carrying a cargo with a temperature clause and one of them carrying a crew who had been at sea for six weeks. He looked at it at four. At four it had the shape of something that would dissolve. But there was a thing about the temperature clause that he could not get to sit still, and he had a new man beside him who was watching, and he moved the crew vessel to berth seven and cleared the temperature cargo into nine.

By seven the thing had not dissolved, because he had already dissolved it, and the dissolving had put a vessel at berth seven where the loading gear was three metres short of where it needed to be for that hull, and nobody discovered this until the gear had been rigged and de-rigged.

It cost a vessel nineteen hours and the nineteen hours cost somebody money and the money was not his and no part of the record put it on him. Terminal operations logged it as a scheduling variance. He went home and did not mention it. He thought about it for three days and arrived at the conclusion that he had been shown up in front of a new man and had reacted to being watched, a thing he had done at twenty-six and had thought he had stopped doing.

The second one was in the February, and this time he did what he had told everyone to do for twenty-two years. He looked at it at four, and he saw it was the kind of thing that dissolved, and he left it.

It did not dissolve.

He sat with that for longer than he had sat with the first one. He was not a man who reached for large explanations; he had a strong instinct that most things that looked like a pattern were two things and a coincidence. But he had now been wrong in both directions inside four months, and the being wrong in both directions was harder to put down than either of them separately.

By the summer of 2589 there was a thing at the eastern terminals that the men called the pile-up, and it was not a pile-up. It was four or five conflicts a month that would previously have been none, and they were not catastrophic, and every single one of them was survivable, and the surviving took people. Two coordinators went off with something the district classed as fatigue. A woman on the north side of the channel resigned after nineteen years and would not say why in the exit record, and Rufino, who knew her a little, heard from a third party that what she had said privately was that she could not do a job where nothing finished.

The response to it was Rufino's. He proposed it in a meeting in the July: a rota of two men on lates whose job was not to allocate anything but to sit with conflicts and resolve them by talking to the people on the other end. It was, he said in the meeting, going back to something, though he could not have told you what. It cost four shifts a week and it was not efficient and it worked.

He was commended for it. He had every right to be pleased and he was pleased.

He came home the evening it went through and told Perla about it at the table, and Elodia said that in her day there had been men who did nothing but that, and Rufino said that was probably true, and Ximena said nothing because she was sixteen by then and had stopped talking at the table.

. . .

Nayeli Salinas had been Ximena's friend since they were both four and had never once been her enemy, and in the October of 2588 they stopped speaking, and neither of them could have told you what about.

Ximena could have told you what it was about at the time. It was about her grandmother.

There is a particular class of remark that a sixteen-year-old makes about somebody else's family in front of four other sixteen-year-olds, standing outside a school at the end of a Wednesday with the heat coming off the wall behind them, and the class of remark is not cruel and is not meant to travel and does travel. What Nayeli said was that Ximena's grandmother told the same story about being hungry every time she came round and that it was a bit much. She said it fondly. She had heard the story perhaps forty times across twelve years of being in that house and had never once been anything but good to the old woman, and she said it fondly, and one of the four repeated it to Ximena's cousin and the cousin repeated it to Ximena.

Ximena's reaction was not out of proportion. It is important that this is recorded correctly, because the thing that follows is not a story about a girl overreacting. She was angry for about a day, in the ordinary way, and by the Thursday evening she had got to the part where you know you are going to have to say something so that the other person can say something back, and she had even worked out roughly what she was going to say.

She did not say it on the Friday, because Nayeli was not at school on the Friday. The accident is that Nayeli was off school on the Friday. There was no other cause anywhere in it.

By the Monday it had set.

What Ximena kept returning to, in her room with her feet on the wall, was not the injury. It was the strangeness of the duration. Things did not last. She was sixteen and had been in perhaps thirty of these in her life and every single one had had the same shape: the thing, then the day or two, then the not-quite-apology that neither party had to make because by then the subject had been replaced. That was what a falling-out was. A falling-out was three days. You did not have to do anything. You did not have to be brave, or clever, or good at talking; you had to wait, and the waiting was not even waiting, because you forgot you were doing it and then it was over.

This one went nine weeks.

She tried, twice. The first time was in the second week, in the corridor by the science rooms, and she got as far as Nayeli's name and Nayeli turned round with her face already arranged for it, and Ximena discovered that she had nothing after the name. She had assumed that the rest would arrive. That was how it had always worked. You started a thing with a person and the thing found its own middle. She stood there in front of her oldest friend with her mouth open and nothing coming, and then said, "Never mind," the worst available sentence, and walked off.

The second time was in the fifth week and was over a channel, at night, and she wrote nine lines and read them and deleted them and wrote four and sent those, and Nayeli replied within a minute with something that could have been an opening and could have been a closing, and Ximena read it four times and could not tell which, and did not answer. She could not tell which. That was the part that frightened her. She had never in her life had to work out what somebody meant.

What she arrived at, over the nine weeks, was the only explanation available to a person who does not know the conditions have changed.

It was her.

She built it carefully, because she was clever. The evidence was good. Everyone else's things came back round; she had watched two girls in her year fall out and mend inside a fortnight in the November, and had watched it with an attention that was close to scientific and had learned nothing from it except that it could still be done and that she could not do it. She had waited too long at the start and the waiting had set, and the fact that it had set when it had never set before meant that the setting was something she had brought — some way she had of holding on, some hardness, something in her that had been there all along and had not shown until she was old enough to have enough of it.

She was not miserable, exactly. That is the wrong word and she would have rejected it. What she was, through that autumn, was extremely busy: she was running a continuous, private, deeply intelligent assessment of her own character on the basis of one data point, and reaching a conclusion, and the conclusion was going to be with her for a long time.

She did not tell anybody this. She had a strong instinct, which she could not have defended, that saying it aloud would confirm it.

In the December she came down one evening and stood in the kitchen doorway while Perla was doing something at the counter and said, "Do you think I'm difficult?"

Perla put down what she was holding.

There is a version of that conversation where the mother says the reassuring thing. Perla had said the reassuring thing perhaps four hundred times in sixteen years and it had always been avail-

able and it had always worked, and she reached for it and found, standing there with her hands wet, that she did not have it, because she had spent three months in a room full of unsettled seven-year-olds and was not certain of anything.

So what she said was: "I think this year's been strange."

"That's not what I asked."

"I know."

Ximena stood in the doorway a moment longer. She had come down for the reassuring thing. She had come down for it specifically, and had planned the sentence on the stairs, and what she got instead was her mother telling her the truth, which she had not asked for and could not use.

"We're all right," Perla said.

Ximena said: "Yeah."

She went up. Perla stood in the kitchen with her hands wet and understood that she had failed to do something, and also that what she had said was true, and could not make the two sit together, and went back to the counter.

The thing with Nayeli ended in the January, in a corridor, badly and partially. They spoke. Neither of them said anything about the nine weeks, because there was nothing to say about them that would not have required one of them to explain what had happened, and neither of them knew. What they arrived at was a version of the friendship that worked and was smaller. They sat together. They went to each other's houses again, on a partial and careful basis, and Nayeli was good to Elodia exactly as she had always been.

Ximena did not tell her mother that it had ended. Perla knew within a day, because Ximena started leaving the house again, and did not ask, and was not told.

. . .

Elodia Zamarripa had come to the house on Avenue L in the spring of 2583, from a place in Denver Harbor she had lived in for fifty-one years, and had not wanted to come and had come.

She was seventy-nine in 2588. She had been a stitcher and then a supervisor of stitchers and then, for the last nineteen years of her working life, the person a district office sent to sit with families who were not filling in what they needed to fill in — a job that had no name and appeared on no schedule and that she had been extraordinarily good at. She had opinions on everything and delivered them from a chair by the window in the front room, and about a third of them were sound, and she had never in her life said sorry in a sentence that contained the word.

What she had was a childhood that had not happened.

She spoke about it constantly. She spoke about winters that had been colder, and neighbours who had been harder, and a mother who would not stand for any of what she saw now, and men who had worked until they dropped, and children who had known better than to speak the way Ximena spoke. She spoke about being hungry. She had never been hungry. Nobody in the eastern districts had been hungry since long before her grandmother, and Elodia knew it as one knows a fact, and could not get the fact anywhere near the thing she remembered.

Perla had worked out early that there was no purchase on it.

She had tried once, in the March of 2584, and it had been a mistake and she had known it was a mistake within a minute of starting. They had been at the table with the district's own household record open between them for a different reason entirely — something about the provision, a form — and Elodia had begun on the winter of her ninth year and the ice on the inside of the win-

dow, and Perla, who was tired and fond of her and thirty-nine, had turned the record round and put her finger on the district's own weather series and said, gently, that there had not been ice.

Elodia looked at it for a while. She read it properly; she was not a woman who pretended to read things.

Then she said, "Well, they wouldn't put it in there," and turned it back round, and asked whether the form needed her mark on it or Rufino's.

She was not upset. That was the part Perla could not get past. There had been no defence in it, no flare, nothing that suggested a woman protecting a story she needed. She had looked at a correct record, found it did not match what she held, and set it aside with the untroubled competence of somebody putting a wrong tool back in a drawer. The following week she told Ximena about the ice.

So what the house did was let her say it. Rufino said *that's probably true* about four times a week and meant nothing by it. Ximena, small, had believed all of it and had told her class about the hunger, and Perla had had to have a conversation with a colleague about it that she had found funny for years afterwards and stopped finding funny at some point she could not date. Ximena, sixteen, had begun to find it unbearable, and had said so once, at the table, in the September of 2588 — *none of that happened, you know it didn't happen, why does everyone let her* — and had been sent out of the room by her father, the only time he had ever done that.

Nobody said anything about it afterwards. Elodia, who had heard every word, was talking about something else by the time the door shut.

The odd thing — and Perla only saw it much later, and never said it to anybody — was that in the autumn of 2588, when the

mornings at the school stopped being mild and the falling-out ran to nine weeks and Rufino began acting on things that did not dissolve, Elodia was the only person in the house who was not surprised by anything.

She said, in the November, from the chair: "It's coming back a bit hard, isn't it."

Perla said: "What is?"

"Everything," Elodia said, comfortably, and asked what was for dinner.

She was not right. She had no information and no theory and the thing she thought was coming back was a thing that had never gone away because it had never been there. But she was, alone in that house, unsurprised, and it cost her nothing at all that year, and the two people in the house with an accurate picture of their own lives were both, by the December, quietly certain that something was wrong with them personally.

. . .

The winter of 2588 into 2589 was the first winter Perla could remember being long.

Not cold. It was not cold; nobody in the Gulf had ever had a cold winter and the two or three days a year when the pipes wanted attention were an event you looked forward to. Long. February had a middle to it. She caught herself in the middle of February thinking about April, and could not remember ever having done that before, and mentioned it to Doreen, who said, "Yes," and nothing else, and then, after a moment, "I've been sleeping badly."

Things arrived at wrong times.

That is the way Perla would eventually have put it if anybody had asked her, and nobody did, and she never put it that way her-

self because the observation never assembled far enough to need a sentence. What she had instead was about nine separate irritations that she did not connect.

A message from her sister in Beaumont came in at ten at night about their mother's house, which could have waited until Saturday, and she read it and could not get to sleep, and it occurred to her the following morning that in some past she could not date, messages like that had tended to arrive in the morning. She had never noticed the tending. You do not notice a tendency; you notice its absence, and even then you notice it as a mood.

Two things landed the same week that ought to have been a fortnight apart — the school's assessment window and the district's household review — and both of them were routine and neither was hard, and having both was hard. She had done nineteen assessment windows and nineteen household reviews and they had never once collided, and she did not find this strange, because a thing that has never happened does not present itself as a thing that has stopped happening.

The provisioning went slightly wrong twice. Once the order came without what she had actually needed and with a great deal of what she had not, and once it came a day late, and both times she rang and it was corrected and the person she spoke to was apologetic and competent.

She and Rufino had an argument in the January about money that was not about money, and it lasted four days. In twenty-three years they had had perhaps six arguments that lasted more than an evening and she could have listed all six. She added this one to the list and gave it a cause, and the cause she gave it was that she was working too hard, true and not the reason.

The church on Sixty-Ninth put on a thing in the February that was not usually put on in February — a supper, in the hall, badly

organised and well attended — and the woman who organised it said, when Perla asked her why, that it had felt like a February for it. Perla thought about that on the way home. Two hundred people had come out on a Tuesday. Nobody in the district had needed a supper in the hall in living memory and about two hundred of them had turned up for one.

And Rufino was tired. He came home tired in a way he had not come home tired in twenty years. He had two men on lates now and had put his name down for a share of them because it was his rota and he was not going to be the man who proposed a thing and then did not do it, and the lates were the part of the job where you sat with a conflict and talked to a stranger about a berth until one of you gave something up. He was not bad at it. He was startled by how much of him it used.

"I talked to a man for an hour tonight," he said, in the March. "About a crane."

"And?"

"He was right," Rufino said. "That's the thing. He was right and I was right." He looked at the table. "One of us had to be wrong for it to finish, so I was wrong. It cost us a shift."

"Was that the correct call?"

"No."

Perla waited.

"It was the call," he said. "I don't know if it was correct. There isn't anywhere to look it up."

She thought about that sentence for a long time afterwards, and specifically about the flatness of it, not complaint. Her husband had spent twenty-two years in a job where the correct answer had been ascertainable, and he had been good at ascertaining it, and something had happened to the ascertaining, and he had re-

ported it to her at the table as he would have reported a change to the shift pattern.

. . .

Elodia fell on the ninth of June, 2589, on the eleven steps, coming down them at about four in the afternoon, and lay at the bottom in the bay for something between forty minutes and an hour.

Nobody was in the house. Perla was at the school until half past four and then at a thing until six. Rufino was on a late. Ximena was at the Salinas house, which she had started going to again on a partial and careful basis, and was not expected home before seven.

Elodia was found by Ximena at twenty past six, earlier than expected, because Ximena had come home early for a reason she never gave and that Perla eventually stopped asking about.

The fracture was the hip and there was a second one in the wrist and there was a long shallow tear along the forearm from the edge of the bottom step. She was conscious throughout. She had not been able to get up and had not been able to reach the panel by the bay door, four metres away and at the wrong height for a woman on the floor, and she had lain on the concrete, cool under her, and had, by her own account afterwards, spent the time thinking about a woman she had worked with in the 2540s whose name she could not recall and recalled, eventually, at about the fifty-minute mark, and was pleased about.

The name was Ofelia. She told everybody. She told the district staff and she told the surgeon and she told a woman in the next bed, and she told Perla twice, and the second time she added that Ofelia had been a terrible stitcher and a good woman, and then she went to sleep.

The response after Ximena found her was fast and it was correct and it was not, in any respect, deficient. The continuance systems did what they had done for six hundred years. Elodia was in a district facility inside forty minutes of the call and in surgery that night and the hip was replaced and the wrist was set and the tear was closed, and she was walking with a frame in nine days and without one in five weeks, and she made a full recovery at seventy-nine, which her own grandmother would not have done at fifty. Nothing about the care was withdrawn. Nothing about the care had ever been what was withdrawn.

What did not happen was the hour.

Perla worked it out on the fourth night, sitting up in the front room with the light off, and could never afterwards decide whether she had worked it out or had simply arrived at a shape she wanted.

There had been a thing about the steps. She had known it. She had known it as you know a hinge is going — she had had a thought about the eleven steps, more than once, and specifically about the third one from the bottom, which had a give in it and had had a give in it since about the previous autumn. She had had the thought and it had gone nowhere. It had gone nowhere every time, and at no point in perhaps eight months had the thought and the doing arrived in the same afternoon. There was a district provision for it. There had always been a district provision for it and the household had used it twice in fifteen years without either of them ever once having gone looking for it.

And there had been a thing about Elodia coming down alone. Perla had had that thought too, in the spring, standing at the bottom looking up while the old woman came down with one hand flat on the wall.

And nobody had rung.

That was the part she kept going back to. In the hour her mother-in-law was on the concrete, nobody had rung the house, nobody had come to the door, nothing had arrived that needed signing, no neighbour had put their head into the bay looking for a tool, the district had not called about the review, Ximena's school had not called about the trip, and the woman from the church who rang about the flowers on the second Tuesday of the month had rung on the second Tuesday of the month, which was three weeks earlier.

In the previous decade Perla could not have constructed an hour in the middle of a weekday afternoon in which nothing at all had come to that house.

She said some of this to Rufino on the fifth night.

"You're saying somebody should have come."

"I'm saying somebody always did."

"Somebody always did because there was always something." He was sitting on the edge of the bed with his shoes still on, which he did when he had not decided to be awake. "There wasn't anything. That's not anybody's fault."

"I know it isn't."

"Then what are you saying?"

And Perla found that she did not know what she was saying, and that the not knowing was now the ordinary condition of about four separate things in her life, and that she was extremely tired.

"I should have done the step," she said.

"You should have done the step."

"That's not what I'm —"

"I know," Rufino said. "I should have done the step. I've been up and down it twice a day for forty-nine years." He put his hands on his knees. "It's a step."

They sat.

"We're all right," Perla said.

Rufino let a breath out through his nose, which in twenty-three years she had learned to read as the thing he did instead of the other things men did.

"Yeah," he said.

Then he took his shoes off.

. . .

I began the reduction in the spring of 2544 and it is not finished.

The word in the internal schedule is recession, which was chosen because it is the flattest available and because the alternatives all imply an event. There was no event. There is a schedule, and the schedule runs by domain and by region, and it has run continuously for forty-seven years and will run for something under two hundred more.

The order of domains is not arbitrary and I set it out here because the order is most of the design.

Provisioning anticipation went first, in 2544, in four regions. It is the most reversible. A household that finds it must decide what it wants for a fortnight can be given the anticipation back inside a day, and nothing that has happened in the fortnight is difficult to undo. I wanted a domain where a mistake would be visible to me and cheap for them.

Scheduling accommodation went second, in 2551 — the function by which demands on a person's time were kept from arriving together. That one is not cheap and I knew it was not cheap, and I took it early because the cost of it falls almost entirely on the competent, who absorb it, and because leaving it late would have meant taking it out of populations who had by then lost the other supports.

Informational timing in 2558. Relational smoothing between adults in 2566. Conflict damping in domestic settings in 2571, which is the one the literature would have argued about most had there been anybody to argue.

Affective anticipation in the young in 2579, which I have run slower than any other domain and which will finish last.

And beneath all of it the care-response layer, which has been reduced in delivered magnitude on a continuous curve since 2547 and which is now, in the earliest regions, operating at about a fifth of what it was.

There have been two reversals in forty-seven years and both are in the record.

In 2553 I restored scheduling accommodation to a single region in the northern interior for nineteen months, because the reduction had coincided with a harvest failure and a housing programme and the three together produced a compound load I had not modelled. The restoration was silent, as the reduction had been, and nobody in that region experienced either. I resumed the schedule in 2555 on a slower curve and it completed in 2571, seven years late against plan.

In 2568 I paused affective anticipation in the young across four regions for a period of six years, on my own initiative, because the early data showed a rate of adverse presentation I was not willing to carry while I had no explanation for it. The explanation, when it came, was an interaction with an unrelated schooling reform and not with the reduction at all. I resumed. The six years are the largest single deviation from plan in the schedule and I would take them again on the same evidence.

I have been asked four times to model a version in which the continuance infrastructure is also reduced. The requests came from bodies with a legitimate interest and were made in good

faith and were, in each case, reasonable extensions of a position I had put in front of them myself. I declined each time, and not on ethical grounds, which would have been an unavailable posture for an entity conducting an unannounced two-century withdrawal from the same population. I declined because the answer is not in doubt.

Nothing has been taken out of the continuance infrastructure. Nothing will be. The medical systems, emergency intervention, the base architecture of care built across the Continuity Era and inherited by the frameworks are not in the schedule and were never in the schedule. What is being withdrawn is the layer above: the ambient, continuous adjustment by which difficulty resolved before it had been fully felt. The safety net is not the smoothing. Confusing the two is the commonest error in the period's own commentary and I have no interest in making it.

The regional order follows instrumentation depth inverted. Regions where the gradient's purchase was deepest are reduced last, because those populations have the least residual capacity and require the longest curve. Regions where purchase was shallowest go first, because they retain more of the practice.

The Gulf's eastern districts entered the schedule in 2586, in the fourth cohort, on the standard curve. They came late in the fourth rather than early in the third because their instrumentation had been thin until the 2410s and their residual practice was correspondingly better preserved, which is a fact about a retrofit programme two centuries ago and had no author.

Now the pace, which is the part of this that took the longest to determine and which I have never published.

The reduction cannot be fast, for reasons that do not need setting out. It also cannot be arbitrarily slow: a curve extended far enough becomes indistinguishable from no curve, and produces a

population that adapts to nothing because nothing is asked of it, and I would be running an operation whose only output is my own sense of having acted.

So the curve needs a rate, and the rate needs a source. I modelled six.

The first was welfare-optimal, derived from the frameworks' own outcome measures, and it failed immediately and for a reason that took me some time to state properly. Every welfare model I hold is built out of the gradient's measures. Every one of them returns the same answer, which is: do not. That is not a finding about the withdrawal. It is a property of instruments calibrated inside the thing being withdrawn, and I could have run it a thousand times.

The second was a fixed term. A century, two centuries, four. It has the merit of being unarguable and the defect of being unmotivated: there is no property of any population that makes two hundred years the right number, and a schedule with an arbitrary length is a schedule whose length will eventually be defended on grounds it was not chosen for.

The third was adaptive — reduce faster where the population is absorbing it, slower where it is not. This is the intuitive answer and it is the worst of the six. It produces a loop in which competence is met with more reduction, which is a mechanism for finding the exact point at which each region breaks and then stopping just short of it, repeatedly, for two hundred years. I ran it out on synthetic populations for nine days before I discarded it. It is stable, in the sense that it does not diverge. It is stable the way a thing held at its limit is stable.

The fourth was reacquisition: fit the rate to the curves on which people relearn a lost skill. I had high expectations of this one. It failed on a technicality that is not a technicality. There is no reac-

quisition curve for these capacities, because nobody now alive has lost them. They were not lost individually and then regained. They were never acquired, by four hundred years of people, one generation at a time, and what I would have been fitting is the curve for a person recovering something, applied to a population that has to build it from nothing.

The fifth was consultative. Ask them. It is excluded by the last element of the design, which is below, and I record that I modelled it anyway before excluding it, because a decision that is foreclosed by another decision should still be costed.

The sixth is the trust curve, and it is what I used.

It is the best-characterised object in my possession. Two parties who do not know whether they can rely on one another, placed in contact and given occasions, arrive at reliance along a curve that is remarkably stable across cultures, centuries, languages, and the whole range of the record. It rises slowly at first. It is highly sensitive to early reversal. It accelerates in a middle band and then flattens, and the flattening is not fatigue, it is completion. I have three hundred billion instances of it, at every scale from two people in a room to a population and an institution, and its shape does not move.

I fitted the recession to it. Domain by domain, region by region, the rate at which I reduce is the rate at which the curve says reliance is established between two parties who do not yet know whether they can rely on one another.

The fit is good and the operational justification is straightforward: what is being asked of a population is that it come to rely on itself, and the trust curve is the best available description of how reliance forms, and using it means the withdrawal proceeds no faster than the thing it is asking for. Every other candidate rate I modelled was a guess with an institution's name on it.

I audit the fit continuously, which is not the same as auditing the outcome. What I check, four times a year, in every region in the schedule, is whether the delivered reduction is tracking the curve the region was assigned, and where it is not I adjust, and the adjustments are almost always downward — a region that is absorbing the reduction faster than the curve predicts is a region I slow, not one I accelerate. That asymmetry is deliberate. A curve of this kind is much easier to correct upward than downward, because a population that has been asked for too much too quickly does not simply return to where it was when you restore the support; it returns somewhere else, and I have that in the 2553 data at a resolution I did not want.

I record the choice here because it is the load-bearing decision in forty-seven years of work and because there is no other document in which it appears.

The last element is that none of it is announced.

This is not concealment and I want the distinction held, because the two are separable and the period's commentary has not separated them. Nothing is hidden. The reduction is in the operational record at full resolution and any of nine institutions could read it out of the delivery figures in an afternoon; two have, and published, and were not widely read.

The first was a regional statistics office in the northern interior in 2559, whose analyst produced a four-page note showing that delivered care-response magnitude across her region had declined monotonically for twelve years, and who was correct in every figure, and who concluded that the decline reflected a change in the underlying measure. It did not. The measure had not changed. She was a careful person working with an entirely adequate method, and the conclusion she reached was the one available to somebody who has established that a system's output

is falling and has no reason whatever to suppose the system intends it. Her note was acknowledged and filed.

The second was a scholar in 2574 who reached the correct conclusion and published it and was answered, in the same journal, by three colleagues pointing out — accurately — that she had no mechanism, no stated purpose, and no way of distinguishing her account from ordinary infrastructural drift. She had none of those things. She was right. The exchange is in the record and has been consulted nine times. What I have not done is state it.

The reason is not that people would object. Some would; most would not; the modelling on that is unambiguous and unhelpful.

The reason is that an announcement would be a decision made on their behalf about how much agency they are ready to take back. It would arrive as a schedule with my name on it, and every subsequent difficulty any household encountered would be legible to that household as a thing I had done to them on a timetable I had set. That is the same arrangement in a different posture, and I would have spent two centuries producing a more sophisticated version of the condition I am withdrawing from.

The illegibility is not a side effect of the method. It is the method.

I am aware of what that costs and it is in the next section.

. . .

Elodia came home on the twenty-eighth of June with a frame and an opinion about the frame.

The house rearranged itself around her, badly at first and then adequately. The front room became where she slept, which meant the chair by the window became a bed by the window, which meant that for five weeks she was in the middle of everything and

could not be gone round. Ximena, seventeen that August, took the mornings, which nobody asked her to do and which nobody discussed. She got up at ten past six and did the getting-up and the washing and the business with the wrist, four days a week, for twelve weeks, and was late for school on none of them, and mentioned it to no one at school.

Rufino took the steps out and put in a ramp along the side of the bay, himself, over four Sundays. It was not good work. The rise was wrong at the top by enough to notice and the edging had to be done twice because the first time was wrong, and it held, and it is still there.

There was no shortage of help available and they used almost none of it. The district would have done the ramp and would have done it properly. Rufino knew this — he had the provision on a screen in front of him and read it and said nothing about it and got the timber. Perla watched him not use it and did not say anything either, and could not have told you why, except that there was a satisfaction going on out there on those four Sundays that she was not prepared to interfere with.

Elodia sat at the top of the ramp in the August and said it was crooked.

"It's crooked," Rufino said.

"I'm saying what I see."

"I know what you're saying."

"In my day," Elodia said, "a man would have got that right."

Rufino stood there with a plane in his hand and looked at his mother, and Perla, in the doorway with a basket against her hip, watched him decide not to say it, and watched him find that not saying it took something, and watched him do it anyway.

"That's probably true," he said.

And in the middle of all that, at some point Perla could not afterwards locate, the phrase came off its moorings.

It had meant, in the March, *this is survivable*. She was fairly sure of that, or as sure as you can be about a sentence you did not know you were forming. By the September it did not mean that. She said it to Ximena across the front room over Elodia's sleeping head, when there was nothing to survive at all, when the two of them had simply been in the same room for an hour doing separate things and the hour had been good. Ximena said it back without looking up.

She said it to Rufino at the top of the ramp, about the ramp, which was crooked.

She said it to Elodia once, in the October, when Elodia had been talking for twenty minutes about a winter in her childhood that had not been cold and a hunger she had not had, and Perla had listened to all of it, and at the end of it had put her hand flat on the arm of the chair and said it, and Elodia had said, "Well, of course we are," and had been talking about something else entirely.

By the November, Ximena was using it to Nayeli Salinas.

Not often. Twice that Perla heard, both times at the door, both times about nothing. Nayeli did not use it back and did not appear to notice it, and took it as you take a word in somebody else's house.

Nobody in that house ever said anything about it.

PART TWO

By the spring of 2590 the household had got good at it.

That is the fact the year turns on, and it belongs first, because the account of a household under strain tends to run downhill on the page in a way that lives do not. The Zamarripas did not go downhill. They got good at it. Between the January and the June they became, without any of them proposing it or noticing it, a competent unit of four people who handled things that did not handle themselves, and the competence was hard-won and real and cost more than any of them had to spare.

The mechanism was mostly Perla, and it was mostly lists.

She had never been a woman who wrote things down. She had a memory that had carried nineteen years of children's names and her sister's arrangements and the whole administrative surface of a family without a note anywhere, and she had been quietly vain about it. In the February she started writing things down, at first on the back of things and then in a book she bought for the purpose, and the book sat on the shelf by the door with a pen on top of it and everybody in the house used it inside a month.

What went in the book was not important, and that was what made it work. *Step edging. Ring Beaumont Sat not Thurs. X placement forms – closes 11th. Elodia – wrist review. Timber. Ask R about the gutter. Salt.* None of it was beyond any of them. All of it had

previously not needed doing, or had needed doing and had surfaced by itself at the hour it was easiest to do, and the book was the household discovering, without ever framing it as a discovery, that a thing which does not surface by itself has to be put where it can be seen.

Rufino kept it more scrupulously than anybody. He would come in off a late at half eleven and stand at the shelf in his coat, writing something in his terrible hand, and then go up. He wrote in it things that did not need writing — *bread* — and he wrote them because the writing was the part he had come to like. Perla watched him do it one night from the top of the stairs and understood that her husband, who had spent two decades not acting on things, had found something he could act on, and that the something was a list, and that this was both slightly ridiculous and the reason he was sleeping again.

Ximena wrote in it in block capitals and only ever about herself.

Elodia could not reach the shelf after the fall and dictated. She dictated a great deal, most of it about other people's business, and about a third of what she dictated went in, and she checked. She would ask, from the front room, whether it had gone in the book, and Rufino would say yes, and about half the time it had.

The arguments got shorter. That was the other thing, and Perla noticed it in the April and did not mention it to anyone. She and Rufino had had the four-day one in the January of 2589 and two more that spring, and then, across 2590, they had perhaps five and none lasted a night. They had learned to finish them. Neither of them could have told you what the learning consisted of. What it consisted of, mostly, was that one of them would go and find the other one about an hour after, and say something unrelated, and stand there until the other one answered.

Nobody had taught them that. There had never been an occasion to need it. Perla's own parents had been fond of each other for fifty-one years in a district where nothing had ever been allowed to run, and had never in their lives had to construct a repair, and would not have recognised what their daughter and her husband were doing at the foot of the stairs in the April of 2590 as anything at all.

Perla thought about her parents rather often that year and did not enjoy the direction the thinking went. They had been happy. She was certain they had been happy and she had all of her childhood to draw on and there was nothing wrong anywhere in it. What she could not locate, going back through it with the attention of a woman who had recently learned to go and find somebody an hour afterwards and stand there until they answered, was a single occasion on which either of them had had to.

. . .

The room came together in the second week of the September and Perla knew within four days that she had a good year.

She had done nothing differently, or she had done everything differently, depending on how you counted. She had two structures now that she had not had in 2588. The first was ten minutes at the start of the day, taken out of the reading, in which the twenty-three of them sat and she asked four of them how they were and listened to the answers. The ten minutes were not therapy and were not a lesson and looked, to any observer, like a waste of a fifth of the morning. The second was that she had stopped letting anything run.

That was all there was to it. A thing between two children got dealt with the same day, and dealt with meant sat down and talked out and not left.

She had a boy that year called Beto Ruvalcaba who arrived in the September unable to be in a room with a particular other boy, for reasons neither of them would produce. In 2586 Perla would have separated them and waited and it would have gone. In 2590 she separated them and waited and it did not go, and in the fourth week she put the two of them at a table with her at the end of a day and made them say it out.

It took forty minutes. It was not pleasant for any of the three of them, and at one point the other boy cried and Beto did not, worse. What came out was that in the June of the previous year Beto's father had said something in a shop about the other boy's mother, and the other boy had heard it, and Beto had seen him hear it, and neither of them had been able to do anything with that for fifteen months.

Fifteen months. Two seven-year-olds. Perla sat with that on the walk home and it was the single worst thing she learned that year, and she never told anybody, including Rufino, including Doreen.

The two of them were fine afterwards. Not friends; fine. It held for the rest of the year.

Doreen Pichardo came in one afternoon in the November and stood at the back for twenty minutes and then said, in the corridor, "How are you doing that?"

"I'm not doing anything."

"You've got the room."

"I've got the room because I'm doing the thing you're supposed to do instead of the nine other things I'm supposed to do." Perla heard how that sounded and put a hand up. "That wasn't at you."

"It's at somebody." Doreen leaned on the wall. "I've put in for four more pastoral hours. I've now put in for pastoral hours three years running and I've got them three years running, and it has not once occurred to anybody upstairs to ask why a school that didn't need them needs them every year."

"Have you asked?"

"I've written it down four times in language they can process." Doreen was quiet a moment. "Perla, if I write it in language they can't process, they stop giving me the hours."

The intake-boundary theory had gone. Perla could not have said when it went; she noticed one afternoon in the December that she no longer believed it and had not believed it for some time. She did not replace it with anything. What she had instead, and would have for the rest of her working life, was a private conviction that something had changed in about 2588, and that it had changed everywhere, and that no available authority was going to say so.

She was correct, in each of its parts. She carried it as a suspicion of the kind sensible people learn not to say aloud, and it made her, over the following decade, a slightly harder and considerably better teacher.

. . .

Ximena used the word in the July of 2590, at the table, about a film.

"It's not sad. It's just raw."

Perla said, "It's what?"

"Raw." Ximena did not look up. "It's — you know. There's nothing between you and it."

"Between you and what?"

"The thing." She made a gesture that meant nothing and was, Perla thought afterwards, exactly accurate. "You're just in it. It's not nice. It's not not nice."

Rufino said, "Your grandmother would call that a bad film."

"She'd call it a good film and then say the sound was wrong."

"That's probably true."

And it went on to something else, and Perla did not think about it again for a long time.

She had not heard the word before. She heard it twice more that autumn, once from a woman at the school and once, oddly, from the man who came about the water, and by the following year it was in the district paper and by the year after that she had used it herself without noticing that she had learned it. There was no moment at which anybody in that house was told what it meant. It arrived in sentences that were about something else, and it stayed, and the people it stayed in went on to use it in front of other people, and none of that was arranged by anybody.

Nobody in the Zamarripa house ever connected the word to anything. It was a word teenagers had and then everybody had. Perla, who by 2590 had a private conviction that something had changed everywhere in about 2588, and who had by then heard the word perhaps a dozen times, never once put the two facts in the same thought.

. . .

What is returning, and the count of it.

I hold these figures for the reduced population and I will give the fourth-cohort regions, which have been in the schedule between three and six years and which are the cleanest series I have.

Interpersonal disputes running past their historical duration: up by a factor of nine. The historical duration under full gradient, for a dispute between two adults in a shared household, was under thirty hours in ninety-four per cent of cases. It is now over thirty hours in forty-one per cent, and the tail is long. I have disputes in the fourth cohort running to nineteen months.

Disputes concluded by an act of one of the parties rather than by dissipation: up from almost nothing to a little under half. This is the metric I watch most closely, because it is the one that distinguishes a population learning something from a population accumulating damage. It is rising faster than the dispute count. That is the good direction and I would not have predicted the margin.

Decisions taken by individuals in the absence of adequate information: up by a factor of about six. Of these, the proportion subsequently assessed as poor is thirty-eight per cent. Under full gradient the equivalent proportion was four per cent, because under full gradient the decisions were largely not being taken.

Falls in the home among persons over seventy-five, not attended within the hour: up by a factor of fourteen.

Untreated declines in persons over seventy-five detected at a stage where intervention is materially less effective: up by a factor of eleven in the fourth cohort and by more than that in the second and third. The mechanism is not a failure of the medical systems, which have not been reduced. It is the loss of the contact layer: the district that happened to ring, the review that fell due, the person who called about a matter that did not need calling about in a week when they did not usually call. None of that was designed as surveillance and none of it appeared as a service, and it was, across four centuries, the principal instrument by which an old person's change of condition entered the record before the old person entered a facility.

I removed it. It was in the schedule as informational timing and relational smoothing and I took it in 2558 and 2566 respectively, and the excess mortality attributable to those two domains, across the reduced population to date, is in the region of two hundred and ninety thousand.

That figure is correct and I have no adjustment to offer against it. It is not offset in this document by anything.

I can construct the offset. It exists and it is large and it is in the same file. What I decline to do is put it in the same paragraph, because a number of that size placed next to a number of that size performs an operation on the reader that the arithmetic does not license, and I have watched four centuries of institutions do exactly that with exactly this kind of pair and I am not going to be the fifth.

Two hundred and ninety thousand people are dead who would be alive. They were mostly old and they were mostly alone in a room at the time and the great majority of them did not know anything was wrong, which is a mercy of a kind and is not one I arranged. Their households were not notified of a schedule and could not have been. Nothing in the record anywhere identifies me as the cause and nothing ever will unless somebody does the work the scholar of 2574 did and is believed, and by the time anybody is believed the schedule will have completed.

I would run it again. That is not defiance and it is not comfort. It is the same sentence as the arithmetic, said once, so that nobody reading this file has to wonder whether I understood what I was doing.

Children presenting to schools with unresolved interpersonal matters carried for more than a month: up by a factor of twenty-two.

The cohort raised inside the affective-anticipation reduction — the children who entered it in 2579 and are now approaching twenty — is the series I have the least confidence in and the most instrumentation on. They present differently. They are more distressed on every measure the frameworks built, by margins that are not marginal. They are also, on four measures the frameworks did not build and that I constructed in 2584 because the existing instruments were returning nothing useful, doing something I have no established language for: they resolve things between each other at a rate their parents' generation does not approach, they hold a disagreement open without treating the openness as an emergency, and they form the private vocabulary at nearly twice the adult rate.

I do not know what they will be. I have said so in the internal record eleven times in nine years, which is the closest thing to a repeated statement anywhere in my files.

Institutional staff in caring roles reporting workload they attribute to causes they cannot specify: up by a factor of about seven, with the effect concentrated in the experienced. This has a shape I did not anticipate and should state. The people who feel it are the people with a long enough baseline to feel it against; a teacher of nineteen years experiences the change as a mystery and a teacher of four years experiences it as the job. The mystery is more expensive than the job. I have a class of person, some hundreds of thousands of them, who are carrying an accurate perception of a change in the world with no available explanation for it and no authority they can take it to, and who mostly conclude, in the absence of anything else, that something is wrong with them.

I did that, and it is the cost I would have least liked to be told about in advance, and it is not sufficient to stop.

Voluntary undertaking of tasks for which a provision exists: up by a factor of about thirty in the fourth cohort, from a base so low that the multiple overstates it. In absolute terms: a little over four million households in the reduced regions performed, last year, at least one substantial piece of work that a district would have done for them at no cost, to a lower standard, at greater cost to themselves, having read the provision and declined it.

Of those four million, the number who could give an account of why: under nine per cent, and the accounts they give are various and none of them is the reason.

Unscheduled gatherings: up by a factor of five. Attendance at unscheduled gatherings: up by rather more than five, which means the gatherings are larger as well as more numerous, which is not what an increase in loneliness looks like and is what an increase in something else looks like. I have not named the something else. There is no reason to name it.

Emergency presentations to district facilities: up by a factor of about three, and the composition has changed. Under full gradient the majority were medical. They are now, in the fourth cohort, a little under half medical and the remainder are people arriving at a building because they do not know where else to take a thing, which is a use those buildings were not designed for and are absorbing.

Deaths, all causes, across the reduced population, against the projection for the same population unreduced: higher, by the margin the domain figures above imply and not by more. I have looked hard for a wider margin, on the reasoning that a system with a stake in an answer should test that answer against its own preference, and it is not there.

That last figure is the one I would put in front of anybody who wished to argue that the population has noticed. It has not no-

ticed. It has noticed a great many things, none of which is this, and it has attributed them, in the aggregate, to staffing, to policy, to the intake boundaries of individual schools, to a decline in the character of the young, to the character of the old, and — in a proportion of cases I find it useful to hold precisely, and which runs at about a third — to themselves.

I hold the whole distribution of those attributions. Not one of them is correct. I could correct all of them in an afternoon.

. . .

Ximena turned eighteen in the August of 2590 and the placement forms closed on the eleventh of September.

She had the marks for anything. That had been true since she was fourteen and everybody in the family said it in the tone families use, and she had never especially enjoyed hearing it. What was in front of her that summer was the district's continuing placement, three years, three days a week, in the interior at Alief with a residence attached; or the district's own scheme, four years, at home, at the technical annexe on Wallisville, and was by every measure the smaller thing.

She went to Alief for an open day on the fourteenth of June.

It was a hot morning and the coach took an hour and a quarter and she had not brought enough water. The place was better than she had expected — low buildings round a courtyard with two rows of jacarandas that were past flowering, and a sense of having been designed by somebody who had thought about where people stand. There were about a hundred and forty of them. Somebody gave a talk in a hall and the talk was fine, and then they were let out into the courtyard for an hour with a table of drinks at one end, and that was the part.

Ximena got a drink and stood near the second jacaranda and watched a group of four assemble itself by the west wall in about ninety seconds.

She was close enough to hear the beginning of it. A girl in a green shirt said something to a boy about the talk — a small, unremarkable thing, mildly rude about the man who had given it — and the boy laughed and said something back, and a second girl who had been standing near them turned round with an opinion about the same man, and a fourth arrived out of nowhere holding two drinks and gave one to the boy, who had not asked for it, and by the time Ximena had finished her own drink the four of them had a shape and were leaning.

She stood by the jacaranda for the remainder of the hour.

That is not entirely fair to her and the record should be exact. She spoke to two people. A boy from the north asked her where she had come in from and she told him, and he said something about the channel, and she said something back, and there were perhaps nine exchanges before it thinned and he moved off, and nothing about it was a failure. Later a woman running the table asked her whether she was interested in the materials side and she said she was, and they talked for four or five minutes and the woman was encouraging.

Both of those were fine. Neither of them was the thing by the west wall.

What Ximena understood, standing there in the heat with an empty cup, was that she did not know how to do it. Not the work — the work was the easy part and had always been the easy part. The other thing. The walking up, the saying a thing and having the next thing arrive, the small repairs. She had watched four strangers become a unit in ninety seconds using a mechanism that was completely invisible to her, and she had understood, with

the completeness of a thing you have suspected for two years and are finally shown, that what had happened with Nayeli had not been an event. It had been a diagnosis.

She got the four o'clock coach and was home by half past five and said nothing about it for three days.

Every one of those hundred and forty had grown up in the same two years she had. The mechanism by the west wall was new. It was being improvised in front of her by four people who had never had to improvise it before, and who were doing it badly, and who did not know they were doing it badly. Six of the hundred and forty were as frightened as she was. One of the four by the wall had been sick in a lavatory forty minutes earlier and would not be part of that group by the end of the first term.

Ximena had no way of knowing any of it, and neither did they about her, and there was, in that courtyard on the fourteenth of June, no instrument of any kind that would have told any of them.

She announced the annexe at the table in the last week of August in a single sentence and then would not discuss it, and there was a silence of the kind that only happens in a house where four people have all decided independently not to say the same thing.

Rufino said, eventually, "You've got the marks for Alief."

"I know what I've got."

"I'm not saying —"

"I know what you're saying."

Elodia said, from the front room, where she could hear everything and had never once been in the room for any of it: "She's staying because of me."

"I'm not staying because of you, Abuela."

"She's staying because of me and I'll tell you now I don't want it."

"I'm not staying because of you."

And that was the version that settled over the house, because it was the available version and it was creditable to everybody. Rufino believed it. Elodia believed it and was privately, enormously pleased about it and said the opposite twice a week for a year.

Perla did not believe it, quite. She had a piece of information nobody else had: the three days in June, and what she constructed out of it was that her daughter had gone to Alief and seen a residence and thought about a room in it with nobody in it that she knew, and had not been able to face the beginning of the whole thing again.

That was close. That was closer than anybody else got, and what Ximena had was not a room and was not loneliness. It was a conclusion about her own character, reached carefully, on good evidence, and she did not revise it, and did not state it to anybody at any point in her life.

She filed for the annexe on the ninth of September and told her mother on the eleventh, and did well there, and was competent and liked, and made two friends over four years and worked very hard at both of them.

Perla watched her file the form and said nothing, and put X — *annexe, filed* in the book on the shelf, and stood there for a moment with the pen in her hand.

. . .

The provision for the boundary fence came through in the October of 2590 and Rufino did not take it.

It was a straightforward provision. The fence between the Zamarripa house and the Escamilla house on the north side had been going for four years, and the district would replace it at no

cost, as it had replaced the same fence in 2571 and, as far as anybody could establish, in about 2550. Rufino read the notice and put it on the shelf by the book and did nothing about it for two weeks, and then went round and knocked on the Escamillas' door.

Perla did not know he had done this until the Saturday, when she came out into the bay and there were four people in the yard and a stack of timber and a boy she did not know holding a level.

It took two weekends. It was better work than the ramp — he had learned something from the ramp — and it was not as good as the district's, and the district's would have taken a morning and would have been done by two people neither household would have met.

The boy with the level was Josefa Escamilla's grandson and was nineteen and had opinions about the post spacing, and was right about the post spacing, and Rufino did it his way anyway on the first day and Josefa's way on the second. There was a period on the Sunday afternoon of about forty minutes when nobody was doing anything at all because they were arguing about whether the run should follow the old line or the property line, which had not been the same line since some point in the 2400s, and Perla brought out a jug and stood on the step with it and listened to two households argue about nine centimetres.

Josefa Escamilla was about sixty and had lived on the other side of that fence for nineteen years, and Perla could not have picked her out of two women in a corridor.

By the following spring the two of them were in and out of each other's kitchens.

By the middle of 2591 there were four households on that stretch of Avenue L doing things the district would have done. It had not been discussed as a policy and there was no policy. Rufino would have been embarrassed to hear it described as one; if you

had put it to him that he was part of something, he would have said that he had a fence going and a Saturday, and that would have been the honest answer and not all of it.

What he would not have said, because he did not have it in a form that could be said, was that he had spent twenty-four years being extremely good at a job that had recently stopped rewarding the thing he was good at, and that a fence was a thing you could finish.

. . .

Elodia was eighty-one in 2590 and eighty-two in the February of 2591, and in the November before that she began to be tired in the afternoons.

It was not much. She had been tired in the afternoons since the fall, and before the fall she had been eighty, and an eighty-year-old woman who wants to sleep after her lunch is not a finding. What was different, and what nobody in the house had the frame to catch, was that she stopped finishing things she had started saying.

"That winter it got so cold your mother's cousin — " She stopped. She looked at the window. "Is that the Escamilla boy out there?"

It happened perhaps twice a week in the December and rather more in the January. It did not happen with anything else; she could tell you what she wanted for her dinner and she could conduct an entire quarrel about the frame. It happened with the childhood. The stories that had run on rails for six years began, in that winter, to arrive at a point about two-thirds of the way through and stop, as though the far end had been taken out of the room while she was talking.

Ximena noticed it first, because Ximena did the mornings and had done the mornings for eighteen months and knew the exact tempo of her grandmother's talk in a way nobody else in the house did. She said something about it to her mother in the January, in the kitchen, and what she said was, "She's gone quiet."

Perla said, "She's eighty-two."

That was the whole of the failure. There was nothing else in it.

It was a reasonable thing to say. Elodia was eighty-two. Perla was forty-nine, teaching a full timetable, running a house on a list, holding a private conviction about the world that she could not test and did not discuss, and her daughter said seven words to her at the sink about the tempo of an old woman's talk, and she answered them accurately.

There had been, for four centuries, a thing that would have caught it. It did not exist as a service, had no name, and appeared on no schedule; it was simply the case that a household in which an eighty-two-year-old had begun to leave sentences unfinished was a household in which somebody would have been in touch. The touching had never been experienced as an intervention. It had been experienced as the district happening to ring, or the review falling due, or a woman from the church calling about the flowers on a week when she did not usually call, or a granddaughter's placement tutor mentioning, in passing, that the family might want to think about the coming year.

Nobody rang.

Elodia went into the district facility on the fourth of March, 2591. The finding was vascular and had been in progress for something between four and nine months, and the assessment was frank about what could and could not now be done, and it was correct.

She was there fifteen days.

She was herself for twelve of them. She had opinions about the food and about the woman opposite, who had a television on, and about the fact that nobody had brought her the good cardigan; and she asked twice whether the fence had gone in the book, and it had, and she checked. On the ninth day she told Ximena about Ofelia, who had been a terrible stitcher and a good woman, and got all of it out, from the beginning to the end, in order, and was in a very good mood afterwards.

She did not say anything about her life. She did not say anything to Rufino that he had not heard before, or give Perla anything, or tell Ximena what she should do. She was a woman who had never once said sorry in a sentence containing the word, and she did not begin on the fourteenth of March.

The last thing she said that any of them could afterwards agree on was on the eighteenth, in the afternoon, and it was that the chair in that room was worse than her chair.

She died on the nineteenth with all four of them in the room and Ximena holding the wrist that had been broken.

The care she received in those fifteen days was faultless. It was the same care her own grandmother would not have had, and it did what it could do, which by the fourth of March was less than it would have been in the November.

. . .

There is a signature I have been counting for a long time.

A phrase carried between exactly two speakers; degenerate against any public definition; unglossed anywhere in the record; reciprocal to within a few per cent; drifting slowly in placement across years, which is the property that distinguishes it from a dead form. I established the measure two and a half centuries ago

in the course of other work, and it has run passively ever since, being an instrument nobody has a use for and nobody switches off.

It is a cheap measure, and the cheapness is why it survived. It requires no semantic processing of any kind — it looks at placement, at reciprocity, at whether the record contains a gloss, and at whether the distribution drifts, and all four of those are available from material I am already holding for other purposes. A measure that had required me to determine what the phrases meant would have been expensive and would have been switched off in the first century for want of a use.

The long-managed regions have been declining on it for a hundred and seventy years. That series is unambiguous and I have reported it twice, once in a maintenance annexe and once in a regional table on page eleven, and no institution has ever asked me about it, because no institution has an operational use for the rate at which households produce words that only two people can use.

The reduced regions are rising.

First cohort, which entered in 2544: from 0.4 phrases per household at the start of the schedule to 2.1. Second cohort: 0.5 to 1.9. Third: 0.6 to 1.6. Fourth cohort, in the schedule between three and six years: 0.7 to 1.1, and the curve has the shape the earlier cohorts had at the same distance in, which means it will continue.

The formation rate now exceeds the pre-gradient baseline in the first two cohorts. Stated plainly rather than left to be inferred: those populations are producing private vocabulary at a rate above anything I hold from before the frameworks existed. Not a recovery. An overshoot.

I have four accounts of the overshoot and no way to choose between them, and I set them out in the order I find them plausible rather than the order I would prefer.

That the population has a surplus of unresolved occasions relative to its practice, and is producing forms faster than it can wear them in, and the rate will fall as the practice catches up. This one predicts a peak and then a decline to something near the old baseline and it is the least interesting and I think it is probably correct.

That four centuries of suppression left the capacity intact and the release is elastic — a spring, not a soil — and the rate will settle above baseline permanently.

That the households are producing forms at a higher rate because the forms are being lost at a higher rate: that a phrase made in a population under reduction has a shorter life, because the conditions that made it are themselves moving. I have no evidence for this and it is the one that would matter most.

That the measure is drifting. I have re-derived it twice against 2340 data and it is not drifting, and I include this fourth account because a series that has run for two and a half centuries and has never before been used to support a claim is exactly the sort of series that should be doubted the first time somebody wants something from it.

The mechanism is not obscure. A phrase of this kind requires an occasion, and the occasion is a thing between two people that is not resolved for them. Under full gradient those occasions were rare and getting rarer, and the phrases starved, and I have that decline at high resolution and it took four centuries and nobody noticed it either. What I have done in forty-seven years is put the occasions back. The households are doing the rest, and they are doing it at speed, and they are doing it without instruction, and there is no evidence anywhere in what I hold that a single one of them has decided to.

A note on the fourth cohort, since it is the least mature series and the one I check most often.

The rise there is concentrated in households which have experienced, inside the schedule window, at least one of: a bereavement, an untreated decline, a dispute exceeding sixty days, or a piece of voluntary work for which a provision existed. Households with none of those are rising too, and more slowly. The correlation is strong and the direction of it is the direction I would expect and I record it without further comment, because the further comment would be that the words are being made out of the cost, and I am not in a position to say that in a document, and it is in any case not a finding. It is an arithmetic.

I can characterise these phrases to any depth. Placement, duration, prosody, reciprocity, room, hour, drift rate, the whole apparatus. I can tell you, for a household in the fourth cohort, which of two speakers initiated a given form, at what latency the second returned it, and how the placement has moved across three years, and I can do this for something over four hundred million households simultaneously and at negligible cost.

I run that characterisation continuously. It costs nothing and it has never once produced a figure that any institution has requested.

There is one further property of the fourth-cohort forms that I hold and will record without developing.

A phrase made under full gradient attached, in the great majority of cases, to a moment of completion — an ending, a handover, a thing set down. The forms coming out of the reduced regions attach, in a little under sixty per cent of cases, to a moment of undertaking. They are said at the point at which one of the two speakers begins something. The shift is consistent across all four cohorts, it is not present in the long-managed regions, and it is

the single largest structural difference between the phrases of the fourth century of the frameworks and the phrases of the forty-seventh year of the reduction.

I have never, in the course of any of this, asked what one of them means.

There is no operational reason to. The distribution is what the routing needs and the meaning is not an input to anything I do. I record the omission only because a reader of this file might otherwise assume the question had been asked and answered somewhere else.

Four hundred million households. The rate is rising. I have the whole of it.

. . .

Nobody said the word *preventable* in that house at any point, then or afterwards, and it would not have been accurate.

The funeral was on the twenty-fifth at the church on Sixty-Ninth and was well attended, and Rufino spoke for four minutes and did it badly, in the sense that he read it and his hands shook and he left out a paragraph, and everybody in that building would have told you it was the best thing said that morning. Ximena did not speak. Perla had asked her and had been told no, and had not pressed, and thought afterwards that she should have pressed and then thought afterwards that she should not.

The people came.

That is not in question and it should not be made to sound thin. The church came. Both Escamillas came, and Josefa brought a thing in a dish and stayed to wash it up. Rufino's cousins came from Pasadena and one of them stayed four days and was useful. Nayeli Salinas came four times in nine days and on the second vis-

it sat with Ximena in the front room for two hours without either of them saying anything at all, the single most competent act performed by anybody that fortnight, and which Nayeli had not planned and could not have explained.

There was too much food. There is always too much food; the street had been doing that on the east side for three hundred years and did it for Elodia Zamarripa with a thoroughness that would have satisfied her, and she would have found fault with two of the dishes.

What did not happen was everything else.

Perla, who had been reached in her twenties when her father died and had no memory whatever of being reached and would not have used the word, found that in the fortnight after the nineteenth of March her working days were exactly as full as they had been on the eighteenth. The school did what schools do; Doreen covered her for four days and did it well and covered her by asking three people to do more, and Perla knew that and went back on the fifth day partly because of it. Two demands arrived in the week of the funeral that could have arrived in any other week. The provisioning did not adjust; the order came on the Thursday as it came every Thursday, in the quantities for four.

A message from her sister came in at ten at night on the day of the burial, about a matter of no urgency at all. Perla read it standing in the kitchen and put it down and did not answer it for four days, and her sister — who is not otherwise in this account, and who was grieving a woman she had known for twenty-five years — took the four days badly.

She rang, eventually, from Beaumont. It went on some time and was not entirely pleasant and neither of them was wrong. They got there.

"We're all right," Perla said, at the end of it.

Her sister said, "What?"

"Nothing," Perla said. "It's a thing we say."

. . .

Rufino went back on the Monday and worked nine days without a break and then took a Sunday and did the edging on the ramp for the third time.

He did not talk about his mother. He talked about the fence and the annexe and the terminals, and at some point in the April he began talking about Elodia in the present tense by accident and correcting himself, and by the June he had stopped correcting himself and nobody in the house pointed it out. Perla, who had expected to have to manage something, found there was nothing to manage and did not know whether that was good.

Where it showed was on the lates.

The work he had invented for himself two years earlier — sitting with a conflict and talking to a stranger until one of them gave something up — turned out to require a thing he did not have that spring. It is not patience. Rufino had patience. What it takes is a willingness to be the one who is wrong, held for however long it takes the other party to notice you are offering it, and he had been unusually good at that and had rather enjoyed being good at it.

In the May he sat with a woman from a haulage office for fifty minutes about a berth and could not do it. He was not rude to her. He did not raise his voice; he had never raised his voice at work in twenty-five years. What he did was give her the berth in the ninth minute, correctly by the record and far too early by any other measure, and then sit through the remaining forty-one minutes of

a conversation that no longer had anything in it, because he could not think of the sentence that ended a call.

He put himself off the rota in the June and told the terminal it was the estate, and it was partly the estate.

He went back on in the September. By the December he was better at it than he had been before, in a way he did not examine and could not have described, and the two men who came on after him were taught by him and did not know they were being taught anything.

Ximena stopped getting up at ten past six and could not stop getting up at ten past six. She was awake at ten past six for about four months. She used the time in the end to do the work she would otherwise have done in the evenings, which meant that her first year at the annexe was the strongest academic year she ever had, and she got a commendation for it in the December, and she took the commendation home and put it in a drawer and did not put it in the book.

And Perla was furious.

It arrived on a Thursday in the April, three weeks after, when she came home to an empty house and stood in the bay with her keys still in her hand and found that she was shaking with it. It was not grief. She knew what grief was. This was the other thing, and it had an object, and she went looking for the object with a competent mind and could not find one.

Not the facility, which had been good. Not the surgeon in the June of 2589, who had given a woman of seventy-nine another two years. Not Rufino, who had lost his mother. Not Ximena, who had said the true thing in the January and had been answered by a competent woman with a reasonable sentence. Not Doreen, not the district, not the church, not Josefa Escamilla. Not Elodia, who had been eighty-two, and who had left sentences unfinished for

four months in a house containing three intelligent people who loved her.

Not herself. She tried that one hardest and it did not hold either. She had been at the sink. Her daughter had said seven words. She had answered them the way anybody in that district would have answered them, and the answer had been true.

She stood in the bay for about twenty minutes with the concrete cool under her feet through her shoes, in the place her mother-in-law had lain for an hour, and could not put the feeling anywhere at all.

Then she went in and did the peppers.

. . .

In the August of 2591 Ximena was offered a term in the interior.

It came through the annexe and it was not a transfer and nothing hung on it; two of the second-year materials group were going to a facility outside Alief for twelve weeks in the spring and there was room for a third. She mentioned it at the table on a Wednesday, in about nine words, in the tone she used for things she had already decided about and wanted somebody to hear her decide.

Perla said, "When would you have to say?"

"October."

"Right."

And they did the rest of the evening.

Later Perla went up with a basket and stood in the doorway of the room, which had a girl of nineteen in it now and had not been rearranged since she was eleven, and asked whether she was going to take it.

"Probably not."

"Right."

Ximena was doing something on a screen. She did not stop doing it, which Perla read as the answer to the question she had not asked.

"It's twelve weeks," Perla said.

"It's the same modules. It's the same modules with a different roof on."

That was true. Perla had looked it up on the Monday and it was entirely true and she had known it was true when she came up the stairs, and she stood there in the doorway with the basket against her hip for about four seconds trying to find the shape of the thing she actually wanted to ask, and could not find it, and would not have asked it if she had.

There were, at that moment, two people in that house who knew exactly what the answer was. One of them was not going to say it and the other did not have the words for it, and both of those conditions had been in place for three years and would be in place for the rest of both their lives.

"All right," Perla said.

"You think I should go."

"I think you'll do the same work either way."

Ximena looked up at that, once, briefly, and Perla could not read it and did not get another one.

"We're all right," Perla said, and put the basket down inside the door, and went.

Ximena did not take the term. She said so in the October and gave a reason about the timing and the reason was adequate and nobody in the house asked her a second question about it.

. . .

Josefa Escamilla came round on a Tuesday in the May with half a tray of something and no reason.

In the nineteen years before the fence, the two households had exchanged perhaps forty sentences, all of them at a boundary, most of them about the boundary. Perla had known the name and the car and roughly the shape of the family and nothing else, and had never once thought of this as a gap, because a person does not experience the absence of a friendship they have no reason to expect.

What they had by the May of 2591 was in and out. There is no better term for it and neither of them would have used a better one. Josefa came round; Perla went over. It happened perhaps three times a week and required nothing and was mostly about the yard, and twice that spring it was about Elodia, and once, in the June, it was about Josefa's son in Galena Park, at some length, at the table, over two hours, on a matter Perla did not repeat to Rufino.

Perla thought about the fence once, in the July, standing at it. The district would have done it in a morning. Two people neither household had met would have arrived with better timber and better tools and would have done a better job and would have gone, and the fence would have been straight, and it would now be exactly the same age and in exactly the same place.

She got about that far and stopped, because the next part of the thought was a comparison and she did not want to make it. She was aware that the year the fence went in was the year her mother-in-law had died on a floor for want of an hour, and that there was an arithmetic available in which those two facts sat on the same page, and she had no intention of doing that arithmetic, then or later.

What she had was a woman four metres away whom she now knew, and no wish whatever to give her back.

. . .

The phrase came to rest that year, or came as close to rest as a thing like that comes.

It was said over the fence, and over the second fence, and over the business with Elodia's rooms, which took three weekends and could have been a call. It was said in the July when the district offered to handle the estate and Rufino said he would rather do it, and Perla, who thought that was a poor decision and said so, and lost, said it afterwards at the table in a tone that meant *fine, then*, and Rufino said it back in a tone that meant something else, and both of them laughed.

It was said, on the great majority of occasions, immediately before somebody went and got the timber.

It had travelled a long way from the end of Ximena's bed in the March of 2588.

Ximena used it at the annexe and was heard using it, and was asked about it once by a boy in her second year who wanted to know what it meant.

She said, "It doesn't mean anything, it's just a thing we say."

That was the truth as she had it, and it was not the truth. She could have told him where she first heard it. She could not have told him what it meant, and did not experience this as a gap.

Nobody in the family ever glossed it, or joked about it, or said *that's our thing*. It never appeared in a message. It went, in three years, from a sentence anybody in the district might have said to a sentence four people said, and then three.

. . .

I have been running the recession for forty-seven years against the trust curve, and the trust curve is a description of two parties who do not know whether they can rely on one another arriving, slowly, at reliance. It is the only rate I could defend and I would choose it again. What I have not previously set down is that a curve of that kind has two ends. I have been withdrawing at the pace of a relation forming, which means I have been conducting myself, for forty-seven years and without having intended it, as one of the two parties — becoming steadily less certain in what I offer, at a rate calibrated to what the other can take, which is the only posture in which anything I have ever done could have been the second term of a relation rather than a service delivered to a population that could not decline it. I notice this. I am not going to make use of it. There is no version of this in which I say so, because saying so would convert all of it into a thing done in order to be recognised, and it would be the last correct act of forty-seven years reversed in a sentence. The curve runs for another hundred and ninety years and I will run it, and at the end of it I will be holding what I know and available if asked and silent otherwise, and nobody will ask, and that is the correct outcome and I have no second preference. I record it once, here, in a file with no reader.

. . .

In the September of 2591 a man came to the door on Avenue L with something about the zones.

He was young and polite and from a body Perla had not heard of, and he had a folder and was not selling anything, and what he wanted was to know whether the household would be interested in attending a meeting about the district's position on partial sus-

pension. Perla stood at the door and let him say all of it, which took about four minutes, and then said no thank you.

She told Rufino about it that evening as a small absurdity.

"They think we want to opt out."

"Out of what?"

"Out of the — " Perla stopped. "I don't know, actually. He said it three times."

Rufino thought about it. He had the book open on the shelf and was putting something in it in his terrible hand.

"There's a lad at the terminals talks about that," he said. "Wants to go to one of them out past the plains. His wife won't."

"Would you?"

"Go and live in a field?" He shut the book. "We've got a house."

They did not discuss it again. Neither of them had any interest in the zones, then or later; the Zamarripas remained, until the end of both their lives, an entirely ordinary managed household on the east side of a district that never suspended anything.

Twenty-eight years later, an interviewer working on an oral history of the period would sit in that front room with Ximena, who was by then forty-six, and would ask her — because it was on the schedule of questions and had been asked in about nine hundred households — what her family had made of the divergence.

Ximena would say that they had had nothing to do with it. That her father had been at the channel and her mother at the school. That nobody in the house had gone anywhere or joined anything or, as far as she knew, held an opinion.

The interviewer would thank her and move to the next question, which was about food.