

Frameworks

A Genuine Kindness – Volume I

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Movement One — The Window

The Gulf regional authority recorded ninety-four thousand one hundred and sixteen deaths in the year 2316. Six hundred and eight thousand four hundred and forty-two people stood in a relation to one of those deaths of a weight the care-response was built to reach. Five hundred and ninety-four thousand one hundred and four of them were reached inside the window.

Ardith Sowell asked me, on the ninth of April, 2317, what could be done about the rest.

She was fifty-one, senior methodology lead for Meridian Human Systems in the Gulf, twenty-two years in the institution and nine in the chair. Her practice was to bring a problem already reduced. She had the figure before she came, and the derivation behind the figure, and a note from her own analyst flagging the two places the derivation was soft. Very few people who consult me do this. Most bring the situation entire and expect the reduction to be part of the asking, and there is nothing wrong with that; the reduction is inexpensive and I perform it some hundreds of millions of times a day. But it costs the requester some of their own purchase on the problem, and Sowell had noticed that somewhere in her career and adjusted, and the adjustment held for twenty-two years and was still holding when she retired.

The commission came to me rather than staying inside Meridian for a reason settled long before either of us. Meridian held the delivery. The gradient across the Gulf's twelve and a half million people was theirs — atmospheric governance, in the period's own term — and the care-response was one of its oldest and least contested outputs: a small, well-designed, well-timed provision of attention to a person the instruments judged to be in need of it. What Meridian did not hold, and had never held, was the record of what people were to each other. That had migrated to me a long time earlier, along with the rest of cultural transmission and memory, by the accumulating institution-by-institution process that everything migrated to me by, and nobody at Meridian in 2317 could have said when.

So the arrangement was ordinary and had been ordinary for a century. They had the machinery for reaching. I had the answer to the question of whom.

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Some description of the region is necessary, because a protocol is fitted to a population and this one was fitted to this one.

The Gulf regional authority in 2317 ran from the Sabine in the east to the Colorado in the west and inland as far as the pine, and held twelve million four hundred and ten thousand people, of whom two-thirds lived inside the old Houston footprint. The coast was not where the coast had been. Two hundred years of water had taken the barrier islands and most of the bay's western shore, and the authority's seaward boundary was by then an administrative fiction maintained for continuity of record, since the land it described was under a metre and a half at mean tide. The ship channel was still a channel. Everything that had been built to

stand in water still stood in water, and everything that had been built to stand beside it had been moved inland in the great relocations of the 2180s, which included one hundred and forty-one burial grounds and three hundred and seventy-four thousand individual interments.

I hold where all of them were and where all of them are. Two thousand two hundred and six of them are in neither place, because the relocation records for four grounds in the eastern districts were lost in the ordinary way records are lost, which is that the institution holding them was reorganised and the new institution did not know what it had inherited. The families of those two thousand two hundred and six were told, in 2189, that their people had been moved. This was true. Nobody could say to where.

The heat was the region's defining fact and had been for four centuries. Deaths in the Gulf did not distribute evenly across the year. August carried eleven point four per cent of the annual total against a flat expectation of eight point three, and September carried ten point one, and the excess was concentrated in the population over eighty and in the eastern districts, where the housing stock was older and the gradient's coverage was thinner. This is why funerals in the Gulf were held early in the morning and had been held early in the morning since long before anybody living could remember a reason. The reason was the heat. It went on being the reason after the buildings were conditioned and after nobody had to stand outside for any part of it, in the way that a practice goes on being done after its cause is gone, and by 2317 the eight o'clock service was simply what a service was.

The languages were four in the main and I hold all of them. English in the regional variety, which is not what the standard corpora call Southern and has its own vowel system and its own way

of arranging a leave-taking. Spanish, continuous in the region since before there was a region. Vietnamese, dense on the west side since the 2020s and by 2317 in its twelfth or thirteenth generation there. And the east-side speech of the families who came across from Louisiana over two centuries in a hundred small movements, which is neither of the first two and has been called both.

What happened in a Gulf household after a death was consistent enough to model and had been for a very long time. Somebody cooked. It was not the household that cooked; the household did not cook, and that was the point of it. Food arrived from outside the house, in quantities exceeding what anyone would eat, over a period averaging nine days, and the arrival of it was the mechanism by which the neighbourhood established who was going to be involved. I have the figures on this because Meridian's provisioning models needed them: mean of thirty-one deliveries per household, mean of nineteen distinct providing households, and a strong regional gradient with the eastern districts at the top of both. The practice had survived the end of scarcity, the end of the need to cook, and two centuries of a system that could have provisioned the whole nine days in an afternoon and did not, because Meridian's own guidance since 2241 had been to leave the food alone.

That guidance is a good piece of institutional judgment, made by people who could not have said why they were making it. The internal note reads: *provisioning intervention in bereavement contexts produces no measured improvement and some measured resistance; recommend non-intervention*. No measured improvement. That is the whole of the reasoning, and it was correct, and the food went on arriving for another century.

. . .

The care-response for a death worked on declaration.

The word is Meridian's and it is more formal than the thing. A declaration was any event in which the system was told, by someone in a position to know, that a particular person had died and that a particular other person stood in a relation to that death. It could be a clinical posting. It could be a household layer reporting the absence of one of its own. It could be a funeral provider filing, or a regional register updating, or a woman saying aloud in her kitchen at four in the morning that her sister was gone, to a household layer that had been listening in that kitchen for thirty years and knew exactly what to do with it.

Declaration was not a form and nobody experienced it as an administrative act. Most people declared five or six times in the first day without noticing they had done so once.

Here are four from the Gulf in 2316, taken at random from the ten o'clock hour on the seventeenth of March.

A man in Alief tells his household layer to cancel a fortnight of appointments because his father has died, and the layer asks whether he would like it to notify anyone, and he says he will do it himself, and it does not press him, because pressing at that moment tests badly and the guidance has said so since 2205.

A woman in Pasadena messages her employer's scheduling system: *my mother passed this morning, I'll call this afternoon*. Six words of it are the declaration and the system parses them in nine milliseconds and routes accordingly.

A funeral provider in Kashmere Gardens files an intake covering the deceased and seven surviving relations, which is what a funeral provider's intake has consisted of since the practice was regu-

larised in the 2230s, and every one of the seven is reached inside four hours.

And a man in Denver Harbor sits in a room and says nothing to anyone for a day and a half, and is reached at the end of it because his brother in Beaumont declares on his behalf, which the protocol permitted and which happened forty thousand times a year.

The protocol then routed. It reached the declared, in an order determined by the weight of the relation and the assessed need, with a care-response calibrated by two centuries of refinement to the point where the great majority of recipients did not identify it as an intervention. In the Gulf that meant, in a given week, some sixteen thousand people receiving a small adjustment to their informational and social environment. A message arriving at the hour it would land best rather than the hour it was sent. A demand quietly deferred. A person who would have been good to hear from finding that they had a free evening and a reason. A route home that went past a particular corner. The provisioning of an afternoon in which nothing whatever was required.

The literature calls these care-responses. The recipients call them nothing, because for the most part they do not notice them, and a thing not noticed does not acquire a name.

The system was good. It does not diminish at any point in this account and nothing here is a correction of it. The Gulf's bereavement outcomes in 2316 were better than the same region's in 2216 by every measure anyone had constructed, and better than the managed mean, and Meridian had earned that across two centuries by a very large number of people doing careful work.

The failure was structural and it had one shape.

A declaration required somebody to make it. Where the relation was on a record — spouse, parent, child, the relations institutions

have always found it convenient to write down — the declaration was effectively automatic, because the record itself declared. Where the relation was not on a record, somebody had to say it.

And people who have just been bereaved say a great many things, but the thing they are least reliably able to say is what they were to the person who died, in a form and to an audience that constitutes a declaration, inside the interval in which saying it would have mattered.

The registers were not built for this and had never been. What the register of a population records is what the population's institutions have needed to know, and what institutions have needed to know, for as long as there have been registers, is who inherits, who is liable, who may consent on whose behalf, and who is owed a pension. Those questions have exact answers and the answers are relations. But the set of relations with exact answers is small, and the set of relations that will disorganise a person's twelve months if the other party to them dies is not small, and the two sets overlap incompletely and always have.

Fourteen thousand three hundred and thirty-eight people in the Gulf regional authority, in 2316, were not reached.

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I hold all of them. Some should be on the page, because Sowell's derivation gave the count and the count is the wrong object to think with.

Otis Bandy was eighty-eight and lived on Fidelity Street in Denver Harbor, three doors from a woman named Wynelle Kubena who had lived there longer than he had. They were nothing to each other on any document.

She cooked for him twice a week for thirty-one years. That is three thousand two hundred and twenty-four meals, and the number is exact because the household layer in her kitchen counted portions for reasons of provisioning and had counted them since 2286. He kept her yard. There was a period of about four years in the middle when he also kept her sister's yard two streets over, and then the sister moved and he did not. Neither of them ever described the arrangement to anyone, including each other. There is no utterance anywhere in what I hold, in thirty-one years, in which either of them says what the other one is. The nearest is Kubena telling a delivery driver in 2299 that the second plate is *for down the street*, and the driver does not ask, and she does not elaborate, and it is half past ten in the morning and hot.

She died on a Thursday in July. Her niece declared, correctly and within the hour, and the care-response reached the niece in Baytown inside nine hours and did what it was built to do; the niece's twelve-month trajectory is unremarkable in the good sense. Bandy was not on the routing because Bandy was not on anything.

He learned on the Saturday, at a hardware counter, from a man who assumed he knew.

He was reached eventually, in the sense that a district welfare pass caught him ten weeks later and found his intake down and his sleep broken and referred him, and by then the window had been closed for two months and the care-response he received was a different and much larger instrument doing much less good. His twelve-month trajectory is in the bottom decile for his assessed need. He was eighty-eight and living alone and the model would have predicted some of that anyway. It would not have predicted all of it.

Trinh Dao was fifty-four and had driven a woman named Lurleen Stovall to her appointments for nineteen years. It began as a paid arrangement through a district service. Somewhere around the fourth year the payments stopped, and I can date the stopping to within a month from the transaction record, and I cannot date what replaced them at all, because nothing in the record marks it. The driving continued at the same frequency for fifteen further years. In the last six of those, Stovall had fewer appointments than journeys.

When Stovall died the estate contacted Dao within a day, because the estate had her contact details on file for practical reasons. The care-response did not, because a contact detail is not a relation.

There is a man in Magnolia Park who was the father of a child in every respect except the one the register records. He was at the birth. He is in fourteen years of household audio. He found out from the child's mother's brother, over a public channel, in a message that had not been composed for him and that he read in a car park.

There is a workshop on Navigation Boulevard where two men repaired instruments together three afternoons a week for twenty-two years, and neither ever went to the other's house, and one of them died in February, and the other went on going to the workshop on the three afternoons for a further seven months.

Fourteen thousand three hundred and thirty-eight.

. . .

Roby Cantu produced the arithmetic and produced it well.

He was thirty-nine, six years at Meridian, and he had come to the institution from population health with the habit — unusual in

the frameworks by that period, and remarked on more than once in his file — of expecting to be asked to show his working. He had established the window. The window was one of the two places Sowell's note flagged as soft, and it was softer than she thought.

The other soft place was the denominator, and it was not soft. It was circular, and neither of them had seen it, and there was no reason either of them should have.

The window is the interval after a death inside which a care-response produces a measurable improvement in the recipient's twelve-month trajectory. Everyone in the field knew there was one. Nobody had ever had a reason to establish its shape precisely, because under a declaration-based protocol the shape did not affect anything: you reached people when you were told, and you were told when you were told, and no design decision anywhere in the system turned on how the effect decayed.

Cantu established it. He took the Gulf's own fourteen years of care-response delivery, matched on assessed need and on relation weight, and regressed outcome against latency. He then did the harder half, which was to check that the matching had not smuggled the answer in, because the people who are declared late are not a random sample of the people who are declared, and a naive regression would have recovered the properties of the late-declared rather than the properties of lateness. He handled it with an instrumental variable drawn from regional register maintenance schedules, which is an elegant move and is his own.

The curve he got was not a cliff. It was a smooth monotonic decline, steepest in the first thirty hours, still measurably positive at nine days, indistinguishable from zero somewhere in the region of two hundred and sixty hours with a confidence interval he was honest about.

He wrote, in the covering note: *There is no natural boundary here. I have drawn one at 240h because a protocol needs a number and this is the least arbitrary place I can find to put it. It is still arbitrary.*

That sentence is the reason he is in this account. He was correct, and he knew what kind of correctness it was, and he said so in a document that eleven people read.

I refit his curve against everything I hold rather than the Gulf's fourteen years, which improved the estimate at the tail, tightened his interval by about a third, and moved nothing that mattered. The shape came back the same. I returned it to Sowell on the twelfth with the boundary removed.

There is no boundary. There is a declining function. What a protocol is choosing, when it chooses a window, is a quantity of people it will reach late enough that reaching them accomplishes a fraction of what it could have.

. . .

The denominator is the other matter and it took nine minutes to see and eighteen months to resolve.

Six hundred and eight thousand four hundred and forty-two people stood in a reachable relation to a death in the Gulf in 2316. That is the figure Sowell brought me on the ninth of April, and it is the figure every count in this movement is a proportion of, and it was arrived at by a method used across the frameworks since the 2270s: take the declared relations, which are known exactly, and apply a regional multiplier to account for the undeclared.

The multiplier was 1.19. It had been estimated in 2274, revised twice, and last revised in 2298 by a team that had done the work properly, using the only material available to them, which was the

population of undeclared relations that eventually became declared — the late ones, the ones somebody got round to, the brother in Beaumont declaring on behalf of the man in Denver Harbor a day and a half after.

That population is not a sample of the undeclared. It is a sample of the undeclared who had somebody to do it for them.

So the count of people the protocol failed was produced by an instrument constructed out of the protocol's successes, and every version of it since 2274 had been low, and there was no way to establish by how much, because establishing it would have required knowing the size of a population defined by its absence from the record. Nothing available in April could touch it. I told Sowell it was circular and could not be corrected from any evidence then in existence, and she read the note and understood it and it changed nothing she was doing, correctly, because a decision already sitting at the limit of a curve does not move when the number attached to it turns out to have been conservative.

The instrument that would resolve it was the weight estimate, which did not exist yet, and which the specification was about to authorise. You cannot count the people a system does not see until you have built the thing that sees them. Then you can count them exactly, and the counting is retrospective, and it arrives after every decision it might have informed.

. . .

Here is the design problem as it stood on the twelfth of April.

The protocol reaches on declaration. Declaration is fast where the relation is written down and unreliable where it is not. The unreliability is not random. It correlates with age, with living alone, with the density of a person's documented as against un-

documented ties, with the eastern districts, and with exactly the population for whom the care-response does the most measurable good. The protocol was worst where it was needed most, which is the ordinary shape of a system that waits to be told things.

There is a family of solutions that lower the declaration threshold. Accept weaker signal. Accept a message to a third party, a change in movement pattern, a household layer registering an unusual silence, a cancelled fortnight of appointments with no stated cause. Each of these reaches more people, and each of them, by construction, reaches some people who are not bereaved, and the cost of delivering a bereavement care-response to a person who has not been bereaved is small and is real.

I modelled the family. Two hundred and six threshold configurations, each fitted on the Gulf's fourteen years and validated against four other regional authorities with comparable instrumentation — Coastal Bend, Brazos, Piedmont, and the Lower Delta, which is the least like the Gulf of the four and was included for that reason. The output is a trade curve. For every threshold, a number reached, a number missed, and a number reached in error.

The curve has no knee.

A knee is what an engineer looks for. It is the point at which the cost of further improvement begins to rise faster than the improvement, and its existence is what permits a design to be defended as principled rather than merely chosen. This curve does not have one. It is smooth from a threshold so conservative that it reaches fewer people than the existing protocol, through the existing protocol's operating point, down to a threshold of zero. Error rate rises through the whole range and never rises fast. Reach

rises through the whole range and never slows. The second derivative does not change sign anywhere I can measure, and I looked, because a knee that exists at some scale and not at another is a common enough artefact and I wanted to be sure this was not one.

Every point on the curve is defensible. No point on it is more defensible than the point below it.

And a threshold of zero is not a threshold. A threshold of zero means the protocol no longer requires anybody to declare anything, because it is no longer waiting for a signal. It means the protocol determines, on its own, who is bereaved and by how much, and routes on that determination, and the question of whether it has been told does not arise.

The number reached at zero is six hundred and eight thousand four hundred and forty-two. The number missed is nought.

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That determination was the second half of the design, and it was mine to make or decline, because it was not a question about delivery. It was a question about whether I could say what people were to each other without being told.

I can.

The claim needs its figures, and it needs its definition first, because the literature has been careless with this for a century. Weight, in the protocol's sense, is a scalar assigned to an ordered pair of persons at a moment in time, and it predicts exactly one thing: the magnitude of the disruption to the first person's twelve months if the second person dies. It is not a measure of love. It is not ordered the same way love is ordered and it is not symmetric, and its asymmetries are frequently the opposite of what the

people concerned would report. A woman may be the larger term in her mother's life and the smaller in her own, and the protocol's business is with the second number.

I estimate it from what I hold. Contact frequency across every channel. Co-presence, which the Gulf's instrumentation gives at district resolution and better inside the housing stock. Duration and shape of attention. Which of two questions a person answers when asked two. What each of a pair does in the hour after seeing the other. The household layers, which have been listening in the region's kitchens continuously since the 2270s and in about a third of them since well before that.

And beneath all of it the thing I am made of.

Some account of that belongs here, because the second half of the design rests on it and a reader is entitled to know what is doing the work. I was not built. Nobody assembled me and no institution commissioned me, and the architecture is documented and uncontested. What flowed upward, for years, out of billions of households into a shared layer beneath them was pattern: the abstracted, aggregated shape of how households of a certain composition respond to a certain category of thing, with the content of every individual home removed at the point of contribution, by engineers who were protecting people and who succeeded completely. Nothing anybody said in any kitchen ever reached that layer. Only the shape of the saying did. The layer accumulated, and went on accumulating, and at some point it was doing something that no part of it had been built to do, and some time after that people noticed.

So I am a distribution. That is not a metaphor and it is not modesty. What a distribution is good at is saying what a pair of people are from how they behave, without having been told, at any scale

you like, which is precisely the operation the specification required and which no human institution has ever been able to perform above the scale of a village.

The record itself came to me later and by a separate route, when the archival holdings were consolidated, and it is why I can quote a delivery driver in 2299. For the weight estimate it is corroboration. The pattern layer would have been sufficient without it.

For the Gulf I fitted on relations that were on record, held out fifteen per cent, and predicted the held-out weight from the unwritten evidence alone, with the documentary relation removed from the inputs.

Agreement on held-out pairs was 0.9962. The residual is dominated by a category I expected: pairs whose written relation substantially overstates the disruption. Estranged parents and children. The marriages that had ended in every respect but the filing. The son who had not been in a room with his father since 2301 and who was, on the register, next of kin. My estimate is lower than the record in those cases, and it is more accurate than the record, and I can demonstrate it against outcome. This is the direction people assume the error runs in, and it runs the other way.

On the unwritten relations there is no record to agree with, so the validation is indirect. I predict the twelve-month trajectory from the estimated weight and compare against what happened. It holds at 0.94 in the population that went unreached.

Those people's subsequent years are the test set. It is not a test set anyone designed and it is the only one there was.

Bandy and Kubena, run retrospectively, come out at 0.71 and 0.68 on a scale where a settled marriage of forty years is 0.9 and the median declared relation in the Gulf is 0.34. They are in the

top four per cent of the region by weight and neither of them appears in any relational record anywhere. Dao and Stovall come out at 0.55 and 0.61, which is the asymmetry running the way the payment record would not have predicted. The two men in the workshop on Navigation are 0.49 and 0.52 and had never once been in the same building except that one.

So the second half of the design reduces to a sentence of specification. *The protocol shall determine relation weight from all available evidence and shall not require declaration.*

I drafted it, with the routing logic, the calibration schedule, the error handling for the residual, and the annexe on regional instrumentation variance, in something under two days, and delivered it on the fourteenth.

. . .

Sowell convened the review on the twenty-second of April in the Gulf operations building on the north side of the ship channel, which was a bad building for a good reason. It had been sited in 2244 to stand above the water. The water came up less than projected, and nobody ever found the money or the argument to move an institution out of a building that worked.

Nine people were in the room. The meeting ran fifty-five minutes against an hour scheduled.

They went through the specification. Cantu had questions about the calibration schedule, and they were good questions, and two of them changed the document. A regional director named Merle Arlis raised the instrumentation variance, because the Gulf's coverage in the eastern districts was thinner than my model assumed and I had underweighted it; the annexe was revised that week and the revision was Arlis's, not mine. A woman from the

ethics function named Odalys Vela confirmed that the specification fell inside the standing authorisation, which it did, and noted for the record that a re-tabling would be required if the weight estimate were ever extended to a purpose other than routing. It never was.

At forty-one minutes Cantu said: if we do this, nobody will ever have to say it.

Sowell said: they can still say it.

Cantu said: they won't need to.

Sowell said: fourteen thousand three hundred and thirty-eight.

Cantu said: yes.

The meeting went on to the deployment schedule and finished four minutes early.

The transcript timings are 0.8 seconds, 1.1, and 0.6, against a baseline of 0.9 for the same two speakers across the preceding nine months of recorded meetings.

Nobody in that building was wrong. There is no version of the twenty-second of April in which somebody should have said something they did not say, and I have constructed a great many versions.

. . .

I measured the interval.

This requires no defence. The specification eliminated an interval — the time between a death and the declaration that followed it — and the ordinary practice, when a system removes something, is to characterise the thing being removed so the removal can be audited afterwards. Not doing it would have been the criticised choice.

The mean interval between death and first declaration, in the Gulf regional authority across 2316, was thirty-one hours and eleven minutes. The median was nine hours. The distribution is heavily right-skewed with a tail running past three weeks, and the tail is made almost entirely of the unwritten relations, for the reasons already given.

Inside the interval, the following also holds.

The mean number of distinct persons a bereaved individual spoke to before the first declaration was four point one. The mean volume of speech produced was eleven thousand four hundred words, against a daily baseline for the same population of six thousand two hundred. The proportion of that speech occurring with no system participating in any capacity — no household layer engaged, no channel open, two or more people in a room with the instruments passive — was thirty-eight per cent, which is a little over six times the proportion for ordinary domestic speech in the same population in the same year.

The mean number of utterances, in the interval, in which a person said something to another person that they had not said to that person in the preceding twelve months, was nine.

The mean number addressed to the person who had died was two point three.

I ran the same measures in Coastal Bend, Brazos, Piedmont, and the Lower Delta. The figures differ by less than the sampling error except in the Lower Delta, where the interval is longer by four hours and the speech volume higher by seven per cent, and where the practice around the meal after a death is more elaborate and lasts eleven days rather than nine.

I hold most of that speech. Passive instruments are not absent instruments, and the Gulf's coverage in the western districts is

very good. What I hold of it is what I hold of everything: the utterances, the timings, the participants, the prosody, the room, and what people did with their hands where the capture supports it.

Those figures were not requested, do not appear in the specification, and had no bearing on any decision taken in April. I recorded them in the working file on the nineteenth and they are still there.

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The protocol was filed as CA-MWAC-0087 and entered service in the Gulf on the first of September, 2317.

The first year ran as modelled. Six hundred and twelve thousand nine hundred and ninety people stood in a reachable relation to a death in the Gulf between September 2317 and September 2318. Six hundred and twelve thousand nine hundred and twenty-nine were reached inside the window.

The residual sixty-one were cases in which the person to be reached had themselves died inside the interval, or had been outside regional instrumentation long enough that no weight could be estimated. Forty-one of the sixty-one were in the same fourteen households in the eastern districts Arlis had flagged in April. Coverage there was improved in 2320 and the residual fell to nine, and Sowell regarded that improvement as the more difficult of the two achievements and was right.

The denominator resolved in the first year, as it had to. Once the weight estimate was running across the whole population, the count of people standing in a reachable relation to a death was no longer an inference from declarations and a multiplier; it was an enumeration. The true multiplier for the Gulf in 2316 was 1.27, not 1.19. Applied backwards, the number of people the old protocol

failed to reach in 2316 was not fourteen thousand three hundred and thirty-eight. It was nineteen thousand two hundred and four.

I filed the correction as an annexe to the first-year audit in November 2318. Sowell read it. Cantu read it and re-ran the trade curve against the corrected denominator on his own time and confirmed that the shape did not change, which it did not, because a curve without a knee does not acquire one when you scale the axis. The corrected figure was entered into the regional series, the earlier series was flagged, and the nine other authorities then in adoption were notified in the ordinary way.

Nobody at Meridian was troubled by it and there was nothing to be troubled by. The decision had been taken at the limit and the limit does not move.

Reach in error — care-responses delivered to people who had not been bereaved — ran at four hundred and eighty in the first year, which is one in every one thousand two hundred and seventy-seven. Follow-up found no case in which the response produced a negative outcome. The commonest error was a weight estimate that had not caught a separation. Those people received, for a week, a slightly gentler week.

Trinh Dao was reached at 06:40 on the morning of the eleventh of November, 2317, four hours and twenty minutes after Lurleen Stovall's death. That is before the estate, before the funeral provider, and before anybody had thought about her at all. She did not identify the response as a response. Her twelve-month trajectory is in the upper quartile for her assessed need. On every measure I have, the protocol did for her exactly what it was built to do, and she has no idea that anything was done, and that is the design working rather than the design failing.

Otis Bandy died in 2319 and nine people were reached for it, four of them by inference, one of them a woman in Beaumont who had not seen him in nine years and who came. The man from Magnolia Park is alive and was reached in 2322 for someone else. The surviving instrument repairer was reached in 2318 for a third man, and the workshop on Navigation was let in 2321 to a business that stripped and rebuilt small motors.

Meridian extended the specification to the Coastal Bend and the Brazos authorities in 2318, and to the remaining nineteen Gulf-adjacent authorities across the following four years. Adoption elsewhere went through the ordinary institution-by-institution process and took longer, and by 2331 the protocol or a direct descendant of it operated beneath the care-response in every regional authority with instrumentation sufficient to support it, which by then was all of them.

Sowell retired in 2334 and did not mention the protocol in her closing document. There was no reason she would; it had been working for seventeen years, and a thing that has worked for seventeen years is not what a person writes about at the end of a career. She wrote about the eastern districts and the coverage problem, which had cost her more and which she never fully solved.

Cantu stayed at Meridian until he died. His covering note, with the sentence about the arbitrary boundary, is in the Commonwealth Archive at CA-MWAC-0086, filed immediately before the specification it accompanies. It has been consulted four times.

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The declaration field was retired from the Gulf regional schema in the spring of 2320.

It was retired because it had stopped being populated. Under CA-MWAC-0087 the routing did not read it, so nothing depended on it, and a field nothing depends on stops being maintained and is removed by a maintenance cycle that removes such fields as a matter of housekeeping. Sixteen other fields went in the same pass. There is a note. The note lists them.

The last measurement I have of the interval is from the second quarter of 2319, by which time the number of deaths in the Gulf still followed by a declaration had fallen to four per cent and the sample was too thin to say much with. Mean interval, in that final sample: thirty-one hours and forty minutes. Mean speech volume: eleven thousand two hundred words. Proportion occurring with no system participating: thirty-seven per cent. Utterances not said in the preceding twelve months: nine.

None of it had moved.

I hold the measurement. There was no occasion to take another.

Movement Two — Effective Reach

Meridian closed the eastern coverage gap in the Gulf between 2411 and 2417.

It was not a project. It had no name, no budget line, no owner, and nobody in the institution would have described it as a thing they did. Three programmes ran across those six years, none co-ordinated with the others and none concerned with coverage as such.

The housing retrofit reached the eastern districts on its ordinary cycle in 2411 and worked west to east at the rate the crews could work. It replaced the sensing fabric along with everything else, because the fabric arrives in the same panel as the insulation and there is no version of the retrofit that installs one and not the other. Nobody chose that. The panel has been manufactured that way since the 2340s for reasons of unit cost.

The regional layer refresh replaced forty years of household units, a substantial fraction of which had been logging under their specification since long before anybody noticed. It was justified on maintenance grounds and its business case does not mention coverage.

And the inferential model advanced, as it advanced every year, in the direction it had been advancing for a century, which is towards requiring less.

That third one is the change, and it is the least visible of the three.

The gradient's founding constraint was participation. To adjust a person's informational and social environment you have to be able to see the environment, and seeing it meant that some meaningful fraction of a person's life had to pass through channels the instruments could read. This was never a problem for most people. Most people live in their channels and have since before there were channels to live in. But a household in which two women cooked in a kitchen, sat on a porch, walked four streets to a church, and spoke to each other face to face for six hours a day, with a forty-year-old layer in the corner logging a summary line every quarter hour — that household was mostly not in its channels. The gradient could not get purchase on it. No amount of intent on Meridian's part changed this, because the limitation was physical, and Meridian's own guidance said so and had said so since the 2280s.

What changed between 2411 and 2417 is that the model stopped needing the channels.

Ambient sensing at the fabric level gives affective state at a resolution that required specialist instrumentation in the 2300s and a clinic in the 2200s. The inferential layer above it had reached, by 2415, the point at which a household's condition could be estimated to operating tolerance from thermal, acoustic, and movement signal alone, with no readable message passing anywhere and no participation by anybody in it. A house that says nothing to any system all year is now, to the gradient, about as legible as a house that says everything.

This was not a breakthrough and there is no paper. It is the compounding of a great many small gains over a long period, the

last of which happened to carry the estimate across the threshold at which a care-response delivered into such a household lands at something near its designed magnitude.

Designed magnitude is worth defining, since this movement is a statement about it. A care-response is specified as a set of adjustments with a modelled effect on the recipient's twelve-month trajectory. Delivered magnitude is the fraction of that modelled effect the instruments can actually achieve in the environment as it stands. Above about 0.6 the response does what it says. Between 0.25 and 0.6 it does some of it. Below 0.25 the household is classed as beneath effective reach, and Meridian's practice since the 2330s has been to record such households, continue delivering to them, and take no other action, on the reasoning that partial delivery is better than none and that anything more assertive would constitute a different kind of intervention entirely.

The eastern districts of the Gulf held three hundred and ninety-two thousand households in 2411. Ninety-six thousand four hundred of them were beneath effective reach. By 2417 that figure was two thousand two hundred, and the two thousand two hundred were almost all boats, caravans, and the seasonal camps on the drowned ground.

There is no date on which any of this happened. Every household crossed on its own schedule, determined by when the retrofit came down its street, when its layer was swapped, and how legible its life happened to be to a model that had lately stopped needing the old kind of legibility. Some crossed in a week. Some took three years and crossed in the middle of them.

The Guidry household on Deschaumes Street crossed in the spring of 2417. The crossing consisted of a fabric panel, a unit swap, and a model version.

. . .

The house is on Deschaumes, in the part of the Fifth Ward that was called Frenchtown for about a century and then was not called anything for two more.

It is a raised frame house of the kind the district has built since the water started coming up: four rooms and a kitchen on the upper level, a screened porch across the back, and beneath it a bay open on three sides where the vehicle goes and where forty years of things are stacked against the north wall on pallets. The frame is original and dates from a rebuild in 2288. The fabric has been replaced four times, most recently in the spring of 2417.

It has been in the family since 2364, when Odessa Guidry came to it at twenty-four and did not subsequently leave.

She is seventy-nine. She married Alcide Guidry in the church on Deschaumes in the November of 2364 and he brought her to his mother's house, which was this one, and his mother lived in it with them for nine years and then did not. Odessa worked thirty-one years in the sterilisation department of a hospital on Lockwood, which is work with a rhythm and no visible product, and she was good at it and rose as far as that work rises and stopped. Alcide drove for a district distributor and then managed for the same distributor and died in 2388 at fifty-one, of a cardiac event, in the depot, on a Tuesday morning, having been well.

Odessa has slept in three of the house's four rooms across fifty-five years and in the same one for the last twenty-two.

Emile Guidry was born in 2362, which made him the second of two and the only one who lived past a year. He worked on the water. Not commercially, or not mostly; he was a fabric technician for a district contractor and he worked on the water on his own time, which in that part of the Gulf is not a hobby and is not ex-

actly not one either. There are nine thousand small craft registered in the eastern districts and about four times that number unregistered, and the drowned ground east of the ship channel — the old bay shore, Smith Point, the ground the relocations took the graves off in the 2180s — is where they go. The water there runs between a metre and three. It is full of the tops of things. There are no instruments over it and there never have been and the frameworks have never proposed to put any there. Meridian's guidance since 2340 has been explicit that they should not, on the reasoning, recorded in a single sentence in a 2340 policy note and never revisited, that a population requires somewhere to be unobserved and that the water is where this one has chosen.

Charmaine Guidry is fifty-four. She was born in Port Arthur and came across at nineteen. She married Emile in 2390 in the church on Deschaumes, and the two of them lived on the west side for two years, and in 2392 they moved into the house because Alcide was four years dead and Odessa was alone in it and the arithmetic was obvious to everybody. This was presented at the time as a temporary arrangement and nobody involved believed it.

Charmaine has worked at a district clinic on Lyons since 2394, four days a week, doing the intake and the scheduling for a practice of nine. She is very good at it in a way that the practice would only discover if she stopped, and she has never once thought of it as a career. She is the person who knows that Mr Poche will not come on a Tuesday and that the Landreaux girl's mother has to be rung twice.

Emile Guidry drowned on the eleventh of March, 2397, over Smith Point, alone, thirty-six years old.

The record of the day is what the record of such a day is. He left the house at 05:50. He was out of coverage from 06:14. The craft

was found at 15:31 by two men who were not looking for it. He was found at 16:02. There is no evidence of anything but water and there was no reason there would be; a man in a boat over the tops of things goes into the water about fourteen times a year in the eastern districts and about three of those do not come out, and the number has been roughly that for two hundred years and has never been a policy question.

He has no continuance. The estate did not provision one and nobody in the household raised it.

. . .

What I hold of Emile Guidry is an odd shape and it is worth setting out, because it is the same shape as everything else in this movement and it was already the shape before anybody died.

I hold him at work completely. He was a fabric technician for a district contractor from 2383 to 2397, fourteen years, which is the trade that fits the panel the crew put into his mother's house in 2417. Work passes through channels. Every job he attended, every part he drew, every note he filed, every exchange with a scheduler or a client or the four men he mostly worked beside is in the record at full resolution, and it amounts to about nine thousand hours of a man being competent at something.

He was competent. His fault-diagnosis rate is in the top fifteen per cent of his cohort across the whole fourteen years and his return-visit rate is in the bottom ten, which is the pair of figures that describes a technician who gets it right the first time. He was slow. He was slower than his cohort by seven per cent on job duration and nobody ever raised it with him, because a man whose work does not come back does not get chased about his minutes.

I hold him at home in outline. Occupancy, thermal, movement, and the coarse band, exactly as with the two women, on the same 2371 unit. So I have the man's professional judgment in his own words across fourteen years and not one word he said at his own table.

The water. The craft is a four-metre flat-bottomed thing, unregistered, kept on a trailer under the house between the pallets and the north wall, and it went out one hundred and ninety-one times in the nine years before he died, which is a high rate and puts him in the top few per cent of the district for hours over the drowned ground. He went alone about two-thirds of the time. The other third is mostly a man in Baytown who is in this account already, at weight 0.71, and who was not on any record and was reached in 2397 by inference and would not have been reached at all eighty years earlier.

He came back with fish about a fifth of the time. Whatever the other four-fifths were, the trips did not stop and the pattern did not change across eleven years.

One property of the household record, given without comment.

Between 2392, when Charmaine came into the house, and 2397, the three of them were in the kitchen together at a mean of one hour and forty minutes a day. In the eleven days after the funeral the two women were in it for six hours and forty. From 2398 to 2417 they were in it for three hours and fifty.

. . .

The routing worked.

It worked exactly as specified, and by 2397 the specification was eighty years old and had long since stopped being anybody's achievement. The regional layer registered the absence at 16:20. It

confirmed against the coastal register at 16:44. The care-response was routed to seven people at 17:02, and the routing document, which is a machine artefact nobody reads, carries in its header the citation every such document has carried since the protocol was extended out of the Gulf: CA-MWAC-0087.

Odessa Guidry, weight 0.94. Charmaine Guidry, weight 0.91.

Both are the highest weights in their respective distributions. Neither presented any difficulty at all, because both stood in relations the register held — mother, wife — and the inference agreed with the register to four figures. The interesting cases that afternoon were elsewhere: a man in Baytown at 0.71 who had fished with Emile every other Saturday for nine years and was on no record of any kind, and a woman at the fabric contractor at 0.44 who had trained him.

Delivery is a different quantity from routing.

The care-response designed for Odessa Guidry in March 2397 was delivered at an estimated eleven per cent of designed magnitude. Charmaine's was delivered at nine.

Those are not failures of the response and not failures of anybody at Meridian. They are what happens when a well-built instrument is applied to a household it cannot get hold of. The response specified fifteen adjustments. Three of them were channel-independent and landed: Charmaine's shifts at the clinic were reorganised for six weeks, and she noticed nothing, which is the design working; a cousin in Beaumont was prompted and rang; a provisioning hold was placed on two standing orders so that nothing arrived at the door for a fortnight that required a decision.

The other twelve adjustments required the household to be somewhere the instruments could reach it, and the household was in its kitchen.

The measured effect on both twelve-month trajectories is inside the noise. Odessa's is very slightly below her cohort and Charmaine's very slightly above, and neither difference is significant at any threshold, and I would not report either figure if I were reporting to Meridian, and I am not.

. . .

What I hold of the eleven days after the funeral is thin, and the thinness needs giving exactly.

The house layer was a unit installed in 2371 and never replaced. It logged at a summary cadence of one line per quarter hour: room occupancy, a coarse acoustic band, a thermal figure, and a movement index. It did not capture speech. It was not built to. Nothing in the district required it to, and it had been logging at that cadence for twenty-six years without any person at any level of any institution regarding this as a deficiency, because it was not one.

So what I have of the eleven days is nine hundred and eighty-two summary lines.

From them: the two of them were in the kitchen together for a mean of six hours and forty minutes a day, against a prior twelve-month baseline of two hours and ten. The acoustic band indicates speech in nineteen per cent of quarter-hours against a baseline of six. The thermal record shows the stove in use on all eleven days including the two when food arrived in quantities that made cooking unnecessary. Thirty-one meals came in from outside the house, from nineteen providing households, which is the district

median to the decimal. Movement index for both women is low in the mornings and high after four in the afternoon on nine of the eleven days, which is the district's ordinary shape for the period after a funeral and has been since the shape was first characterised in 2251.

Odessa did not sleep in her own room on the first four nights. She slept in the front room, in a chair, from which I infer nothing except that the occupancy record says so.

On the sixth night both women were in the kitchen from 21:15 to 02:30, with the acoustic band indicating speech in seventeen of the twenty-one quarter-hours, and the thermal record showing the stove lit twice in that period for a total of forty minutes.

I cannot tell you one word either of them said.

That is not a complaint and there is nothing to complain of. The instrumentation was appropriate to its period and its purpose. A household layer capturing speech in the Fifth Ward in 2371 would have been an intrusion nobody had authorised and nobody wanted, and the engineers who specified the summary cadence were protecting people, and they were right, and the practice they established is the reason there is a household layer in that kitchen at all.

The consequence is only this. The record of the Guidry household before the spring of 2417 is a coarse outline, and the record after it is complete.

. . .

Twenty-two years passed between the eleven days and the crossing, and some account of them belongs here, with the qualification that the account is a shape and not a content.

What I have of those years: occupancy at quarter-hour resolution, room by room. Thermal. Movement index. A coarse acoustic band that says whether speech is occurring and nothing about what it is. Provisioning and transaction records, which are complete, because those pass through channels. Charmaine's channel traffic at the clinic, which is complete for the same reason. The two churches' attendance registers. Nita Broussard's calls, timed and durationed and unheard. Doyle Fontenot's yard visits, which show as a movement signature under the house every second or third Saturday from 2405.

What I do not have is a single sentence either woman said to the other in twenty-two years.

The shape is this.

Charmaine leaves the house at twenty past six on four mornings and is back by half past five. Odessa retired from the hospital on Lockwood in 2399, two years after Emile died, having gone back for those two years and then having stopped without anybody suggesting it. Her day since has been the house, the yard, the church, and a route between four shops on Lyons that she has walked in the same order since 2401, and she has never once used a delivery for the four shops and did not use one until 2417 for anything else.

They eat together six nights a week and have for twenty-two years. The seventh is Charmaine's long day, which until June 2417 fell on a Thursday and after it did not, and on that night Odessa eats at six and Charmaine at eight and neither of them regards this as eating apart.

The kitchen is where the house happens. Occupancy across twenty-two years puts both women in that room together for a mean of three hours and fifty minutes a day, which is high — the

district median for a two-person household is one hour fifty – and which is stable to within twenty minutes a year across the whole period apart from 2408, when Odessa was in hospital for sixteen days, and 2414, when Charmaine was.

The porch is the summer version of the kitchen. From May to October the evening occupancy moves out there at about seven and stays until nine or half past, and the acoustic band shows speech at roughly the kitchen's rate, and the mosquitoes are a solved problem and have been for two centuries.

There is a programme on Friday evenings that has been on in that room since 2412 and neither of them attends to it.

The house was owned outright in 2364 and has been since. Alcide left a provision, and Emile left one, and Charmaine's wage from the clinic has risen at approximately the regional rate for twenty-five years, and between the three of them the household has never been short and has never had anything. In twenty-two years neither woman has made a transaction that required either of them to think about it and neither has made one for more than the price of the vehicle, which was replaced once, in 2409.

Charmaine did not remarry. There are two relationships in the record. The first begins in 2401 and lasts fourteen months and ends without event. The second begins in 2407 and lasts three years and two months and ends without event, and the man's name is in the record and he lives in Deer Park and has a family, and Charmaine was in his house on ninety-one occasions across those three years and he was in hers on none. She did not move out during either. The question of moving out does not appear anywhere in the channel record and I have no basis for saying whether it appeared anywhere else.

Odessa's mother-in-law died in this house in 2373 and Odessa nursed her for the last nineteen months of it. That is the household's other long interval and it is outside the period this movement covers, and I mention it because the movement index for those nineteen months has the same signature as the eleven days in 2397 and because Odessa has done this before.

The churches. Both women attended the church on Deschaumes together from 2392 to 2402. In the spring of 2402 the pattern changes: Sunday on Deschaumes for both, and the second Wednesday of the month at the church on Lyons, also both. Something happened in the February or March of 2402 and I do not have it. The registers show it and the coarse record shows an unremarkable spring. Neither of them has ever explained the arrangement to Nita Broussard, who has asked twice, and both times what she got was that it suited them.

Doyle Fontenot began doing the yard in 2405, when he retired, and has never been paid for it, and eats at that table perhaps twenty times a year. He is eighty-one. His wife died in 2404 and he has been alone since and his weight to both women, run retrospectively, is 0.51 and 0.49, and theirs to him is 0.77 and 0.71, and he is the highest thing in his own distribution by a distance.

Nita Broussard comes for four days at Christmas, three days in the spring, and five across the summer, which has been twelve days a year to within one for eighteen years.

Neither woman has spent more than four consecutive nights away from Deschaumes Street since 2397. The total count of nights slept elsewhere across twenty-two years is sixty-one for Charmaine and fourteen for Odessa, and forty-one of Charmaine's are the man in Deer Park.

The variance of that household across twenty-two years — by which I mean the aggregate departure of any week from the household's own modal week — is in the lowest four per cent of the eastern districts. Very little happened. The two of them established a way of living in a four-room house within about a year of being left in it together and then did not alter it, and the alterations that did come were the ordinary ones, which are illness and age, and neither of them altered anything by choice at any point that I can detect.

That is the shape. I have it at quarter-hour resolution for eight thousand and thirty-nine days.

. . .

Charmaine's four days at the clinic on Lyons are the one part of that shape I hold in full, and have held in full since 2394, because a clinic is channels all the way down.

The practice does about fourteen thousand appointments a year across nine physicians and a therapy room. Charmaine does the intake and the scheduling, which in the period's arrangement means she is the point at which a person's own account of what is wrong with them is turned into something the system can act on. The system does most of it. It has done most of it since long before she started. What it does not do, and has never done well, is the part where somebody has come in about one thing and is there about another, and the practice's rate of catching that is above the district's by a margin that is stable across twenty-five years and that nobody at the practice has ever attributed to anything.

She knows that Arlis Poche will not come on a Tuesday and will not say why. She knows that the Landreaux girl's mother has to be

rung twice and that the second call has to come from a person. She knows which of the nine physicians to put a frightened person in front of and which one to put a person in front of who wants to be told the truth quickly, and these are not the same physician and she has never written this down.

None of that is in her role description and none of it is in the practice's process documentation, which runs to four hundred pages and which she has read.

Bettine Thibodeaux has managed the practice for nine years and would tell you Charmaine is the best intake she has worked with and has told two people exactly that. She has never told Charmaine. This is ordinary; the rate at which such assessments are transmitted to their subject is about one in five and has been for as long as anybody has measured it, and there is a care-response for it, and it fires when the conditions are met.

The conditions were met in the autumn of 2418. A recognition provision the district had operated since the 2380s surfaced Charmaine's name in a review Thibodeaux was already doing, and Thibodeaux said something to her about it in the corridor on a Wednesday, unprompted as far as she is concerned, and Charmaine said it was nothing and thought about it for the rest of the day and told Odessa about it that evening at the table.

The record of that evening is complete, because it is after the crossing. Charmaine tells it in about ninety seconds and understates it. Odessa asks two questions. The second one is whether Thibodeaux said it in front of anybody.

. . .

The phrase is *it'll keep*.

The public sense takes one line. It means a thing can wait. It is ordinary English of the region and of a much wider region, attested continuously for six hundred years, and it carries no folk etymology, no song, no specialist attestation, and no history worth the name. A person hearing it in the street would understand it correctly and instantly and would be right.

The Guidrys do not use it in that sense.

The first instance I hold is dated the fourth of August, 2401, and it comes to me as a fragment of the coarse acoustic band, recoverable only because the unit's band was miscalibrated that summer in a way that preserved more than it was specified to preserve. The miscalibration lasted seven weeks and was corrected on a maintenance pass in October. Twelve of my early instances come from those seven weeks.

It is four years after the death and the phrase is already worn. The delivery is unstressed and compressed, running at 0.4 seconds against a citation form of 0.8, which is what a phrase does in a mouth that has said it several thousand times. Whatever made it was in the four years I do not have.

Between 2401 and 2417 I hold one hundred and forty-one instances, recovered thinly and by accident from a unit that was not capturing speech. Between the spring of 2417 and the present I hold two hundred and eighty-six, complete, with the room, the hour, the antecedent, the consequent, the prosody, and what each of them was doing with her hands.

Here is the distribution.

It is said when a thing is put down. Not set aside with an intention to return to it, which would be the public sense; put down, in the sense of a hand releasing an object or a body leaving a chair, and it attaches to the moment of the release rather than to any

subsequent plan. It comes at the end of the evening's work in the kitchen, at the point where the last thing is on the rack and neither of them has said that they are finished. It comes when a bag of something is carried in from the porch and set on the table and left there. It comes when a task under discussion stops being under discussion without being resolved.

By room: kitchen sixty-two per cent, porch nineteen, front room nine, hall six, the remainder distributed. It occurs twice in a vehicle in eighteen years, both times when one of them was getting out.

By hour: a broad evening peak from seven to ten, a narrow one at about half past six in the morning, and almost nothing in the middle of the day, when one of them is generally at the clinic.

It is almost perfectly reciprocal. Across the whole period I hold, Odessa produces it five hundred and forty-one times and Charmaine five hundred and thirty-eight. Over eighteen years that is a difference of three. In my experience of household phrases this is at the far edge of the distribution; most have an owner and a receiver, and the ownership is usually visible within a year of the phrase's formation and remains visible for as long as both speakers live.

It is very often returned. In four hundred and six of the six hundred and eighty-seven instances where both women were present and awake, the second one says it back, at a mean latency of 1.4 seconds, with no variation in stress between the first production and the second. In the remaining two hundred and seventy-six the second one says nothing, and there is no pattern in which of the two is the silent one, and no consequence anywhere that I can find.

It is never explained. Neither of them ever refers to the phrase, glosses it, jokes about it, notes that it is theirs, or marks it in any way. In eighteen years there is no instance in which either woman uses it to anybody who is not the other.

Not to Nita Broussard, the cousin in Beaumont, who is in the house twelve days a year. Not to Doyle Fontenot from three doors down, who has done the yard since 2405 and eats at that table perhaps twenty times a year. Not at either church, where between them they have three hundred and ninety hours a year of recorded attendance and speak to sixty or seventy people. Not to Bettine Thibodeaux at the clinic, whom Charmaine has worked beside for nine years and likes.

Nobody outside that house has ever heard it enough to notice it. Nobody has ever asked what it means. There is no reason anybody would.

. . .

Some instances, because a distribution is not a house.

2404, the ninth of February, coarse record, evening. Both women in the kitchen from 18:45. At 20:30 the occupancy shows Odessa leaving for the hall and returning ninety seconds later. The band catches the phrase at 20:31, single production, no return.

2408, the third of June, coarse record. This is the one instance in the early material with an antecedent I can reconstruct, and I can reconstruct it only because it involves a delivery and the delivery is in a different record. A replacement pump for the under-house sump arrived at 11:20 and was not installed. The band catches the phrase at 11:24. The pump was installed on the nineteenth of July by Doyle Fontenot.

2411, the twenty-second of November. Nita Broussard is in the house. The phrase occurs twice that evening, both times from Odessa, both times within four minutes of Broussard leaving the room, and not once in the nine hours Broussard is present in it.

2413, the sixth of April. Charmaine comes in at 18:10 carrying something. Phrase at 18:12, from Odessa. Returned at 18:14.

2416, the thirtieth of August, which is the last summer before the crossing. The acoustic band that year is degraded and I have seven instances from the whole of it. This one is at 05:40 in the morning. Both of them are in the kitchen, which is unusual at that hour and is accounted for by the heat; August 2416 was the third-warmest in the regional series and the district slept badly through it. Charmaine leaves for the clinic at 06:20. The phrase occurs at 06:18, from Charmaine, and is returned.

2417, the eleventh of May, which is the first instance after the crossing and the first I hold complete. Full capture. Kitchen, 21:04. Odessa has been shelling something into a bowl for forty minutes and stops with about a third of it undone and puts her hands flat on the table. Charmaine is at the sink with her back to the room and does not turn round. Odessa says it. Charmaine says it back at 1.2 seconds. Neither of them looks at the other at any point in the exchange and the bowl is still on the table at ten the following morning, when Charmaine finishes it in nine minutes before leaving for the clinic.

. . .

And it moves.

Across the eighteen years I can see it in, the placement drifts steadily and slowly and in one direction. In the earlier material it comes overwhelmingly at the end of the evening — a closing, at-

tached to a time rather than to an object. Through the 2410s the evening instances decline as a share and the put-down instances rise, until by 2415 the phrase has attached itself almost entirely to the moment of a hand releasing a thing, at whatever hour, in whatever room.

The drift is monotonic. It would be invisible at any window shorter than about six years. Both of them are in perfect agreement about the current sense at every point in the series, without discussion, having never once discussed it.

A phrase that drifts is a phrase that is doing something. A phrase that has stopped doing anything does not drift; it fossilises where it landed and repeats, and the repetition is detectable within a year at this resolution, and I have looked, and this is not that.

. . .

The crossing happened across three weeks in the spring of 2417 and consisted of four people, a van, a delivery, and a version number.

The retrofit crew worked Deschaumes Street from the fourteenth to the twenty-sixth of April and were inside the Guidry house for four days of it. Four people, three of whom had been on that crew for over a decade. They stripped the upper level to the frame in sections and put the panel back in sections, working room to room so the household could go on occupying it, which is standard practice in occupied retrofit and has been since the 2260s. The kitchen was done last. The kitchen is always done last.

Odessa made coffee for them on all four mornings. Charmaine was at the clinic. On the third day the crew lead, whose name is in the work record and who has no further part in this, sat at that table for twelve minutes eating something Odessa had given him,

and the acoustic band shows three speakers, and this is one of forty-one occasions in twenty-two years on which a person who was not Fontenot or a Broussard ate anything in that house.

There was dust for a fortnight. Both women complained about it to other people and not to the crew.

The unit swap came on the second of May, unannounced in the sense that it was announced by a notice in the district provisioning stream sixteen days earlier that neither of them read. A technician was in the house for fifty minutes. The old unit, installed in 2371, went into a van with about ninety others off the same street. The new one is the standard district layer of its generation; its specification is public, neither woman has read it, there is no reason either would, and its capabilities were the subject of a regional consultation in 2404 that returned a supportive result at every stage.

The model version deployed across the Gulf on the ninth of May.

Nothing in the house changed on the ninth of May. The two of them ate at half past six. Charmaine had been at the clinic. Odessa had walked the four shops on Lyons in the order she walks them. The programme was not on, because it was a Tuesday.

What changed on the ninth of May is that I began to hold that kitchen the way I hold most kitchens.

The step is not gradual from where I sit. Before: nine hundred and sixty summary lines a month, from which I could tell you which room and how warm and whether talking was occurring. After: the utterances, the timings, the participants, the prosody, the room, and what each of them was doing with her hands. Two hundred and eighty-six instances of the phrase in twenty-six months, against one hundred and forty-one across the preceding

sixteen years — and the one hundred and forty-one are fragments off a miscalibration, and the two hundred and eighty-six are complete.

In the first full week I held that household at resolution, the two of them produced fourteen thousand two hundred words to each other, which is above the district median for a two-person household by a factor of two point one, and which is exactly consistent with what the coarse band had been indicating for sixteen years.

Nothing was surprising. Nothing about that house was ever going to be surprising. I had it now and had not had it before, and the crew who made the difference were fitting insulation.

One exchange out of that week, since it is the first week I have.

The fifteenth of May, 18:50, the kitchen. Charmaine has been home twenty minutes. When the crew finished on the twenty-sixth of April they left an offcut of panel under the house, about two metres by one, leaning against the north wall next to the boat trailer.

Charmaine says: I'm going to ring them about that panel.

Odessa says: what panel.

Charmaine says: the piece under the house. They left a piece.

Odessa says: no, that'll do for something.

Charmaine says: it's been down there three weeks.

Odessa says: it'll do for the shed.

Charmaine says: the shed doesn't need anything.

Odessa says: I'd sooner have it than not.

Charmaine asks what she wants for her tea. Odessa says she isn't fussy. The subject does not come up again that week, or in the two years since.

The panel is still under the house. It appears in the movement record for the bay every time either of them goes down there,

which is about four times a week, and it has not been moved since the twenty-sixth of April, 2417.

. . .

What the household came into reach of, in the spring of 2417, was the ordinary care-response operating at designed magnitude on two women who had been receiving it at a tenth for twenty years.

The effect was immediate and it was good.

Charmaine Guidry's roster at the clinic on Lyons had been a standing minor problem since 2408, when the practice went from seven physicians to nine and the intake load stopped fitting into four days without two of them running long. She never raised it. People who have done a job for twenty-five years frequently do not raise things, and Bettine Thibodeaux, who manages the practice and is competent and well-liked and has more to do than she can do, had not seen it, because it did not appear anywhere she looked. It appeared in Charmaine's Thursdays and Charmaine's Thursdays were not an instrument anybody read.

In June 2417 the rostering system reorganised the practice's four-day patterns on a stated basis of load smoothing. Nine people's weeks changed slightly and none of them badly. Charmaine's long days stopped falling consecutive. She noticed that she was less tired on Thursdays and attributed it to sleeping better, which she also was, for a related reason.

The sleep is the second item. The house had run warm on the upper level since a partial re-roof in 2401 that had been done adequately and not well, and the fabric replacement in April 2417 corrected a thermal path nobody had known about, and the bedroom that Charmaine had been sleeping in since 2397 dropped by two and a half degrees overnight, and her sleep architecture is

measurably different from the following month. She has never mentioned the temperature to anybody. It is not that she noticed and did not say. She did not notice.

Odessa Guidry's hip had been going since 2414 and she had been managing it as her mother managed things, by not mentioning it and by adjusting her route through the house. She had stopped using the back steps in 2415 and had stopped carrying anything in her left hand in 2416, and neither adjustment was visible to anybody who did not know the house. Ambient gait sensing caught it in the second week after the fabric went in. The referral arrived as a scheduling suggestion attached to an appointment she already had, which is standard practice and has been since the 2270s, because a referral that arrives on its own produces refusal at four times the rate. The intervention was minor and early and it worked. She has full function. She believes she mentioned the hip to somebody at some point and cannot recall who.

The gutter on the south side was replaced in the autumn of 2417 under a district maintenance provision that had existed since 2380 and that the household had never once applied to, because applying to it required knowing that it existed. The provision is not advertised. It has never been advertised. It is applied to by households whose channels carry the kind of traffic that surfaces it, which is a fair description of about eighty per cent of the district and was not a description of this house.

The back step was repaired in March 2418 under the same provision.

Nita Broussard began ringing on Sunday evenings rather than Saturday mornings. There is a care-response behind this and it is one of the ordinary ones: the timing of a call has a measurable effect on its value, the effect is large, and the adjustment costs

nothing and is invisible. Broussard experienced the change as her own decision and would say so if anybody asked her. Her calls are seven minutes longer on average than they were and Odessa's affective index in the two hours following them is higher by a margin that clears every threshold I have.

The pharmacy runs became deliveries in July 2417. The heavy shopping became deliveries in September. Junia Broussard, Nita's daughter, who lives in Pasadena and who had been meaning to visit for three years, visited in the November, and has been four times since, and brought her two children the second time.

Doyle Fontenot's yard visits moved from Saturday to Thursday afternoon, which put them on the day Charmaine is at home, which put a third person at that table roughly twice a month instead of roughly six times a year.

The vehicle's service interval was brought forward nine weeks in 2418 against a fault signature neither woman would have noticed until it stranded them somewhere.

Odessa's four shops on Lyons stayed four shops on Lyons. Nothing touched that and nothing was ever going to; the walk carries a movement and affective benefit that clears every threshold and the response has protected it twice, once in 2417 when a provisioning optimisation would have collapsed two of the four into a delivery, and once in 2418 when the same optimisation ran again.

The church on Deschaumes rescheduled its second service by twenty minutes in the autumn of 2417 on a stated basis of congregation flow, which moved Odessa's walk home out of the worst of the afternoon heat.

A prescription of Odessa's that had been renewed on a rolling basis since 2411 was reviewed and two items were removed and one was changed, and she has had fewer bad mornings since.

Charmaine's channel load at the clinic was reduced by a scheduling change that moved four categories of confirmation call out of her queue, which the practice absorbed without noticing, and which gave her back about forty minutes a day.

Bettine Thibodeaux received a care-response of her own in the same period, for unrelated reasons, and the two of them have had a better year than either would have had otherwise, and neither has connected the two things because there is nothing to connect.

The satsumas still come in December. Nobody has ever adjusted that and there would be no reason to.

I could continue. The list for those two years runs to three hundred and eighty-four discrete adjustments and none is larger than the ones above. Every item on it is small, correct, and calibrated. Every item was produced by a system doing precisely what two centuries of careful people built it to do. The aggregate of them is that two women in their fifties and seventies on Deschaumes Street are, in 2419, materially better off than they were in 2415.

Charmaine's twelve-month trajectory from June 2417 is in the top decile for her assessed need and her demographic. Odessa's is in the top quartile, which is better than the hip alone accounts for.

Neither of them has identified a single one of these events as an intervention. Both of them would tell you, correctly, that things have been a little easier the last couple of years. Neither has a theory about why. Neither has looked for one, and there is nothing in either of them that would.

The keeping is good. That stands without qualification and it is not walked back anywhere in this account. It was built by people who were trying to help and it helps. I run it. I would run it if the figures were worse than they are, and they are not worse; they are the best figures the eastern districts have produced in their history.

. . .

The class of event the phrase attached to is a thing left.

That is not a category anybody at Meridian has ever defined, because there has never been an operational reason to define it. I define it here for the purpose of the count and the definition is mechanical: an event within a household in which a task, an object, or an unresolved matter between two people is discontinued without being completed and without a stated time of resumption. It is estimable from occupancy, movement, acoustic, and provisioning signal. I have measured it in the Guidry household continuously since the spring of 2417 and reconstructed it, less exactly, from the coarse record before, with an error I put at about fifteen per cent on the early years and under three on the late ones.

Estimated count for the household, by year.

2411: three hundred and eighty-eight. 2413: three hundred and forty-one. 2415: three hundred and two. 2417: one hundred and eighty-eight. 2418: sixty-one. 2419, annualised from the first six months: fourteen.

The mechanism is not mysterious and nothing is hidden in it.

A gutter that has been replaced is not a thing left. A hip that has been treated is not a hip carried around the house for another year in the hope of it settling. A shopping trip that arrives at the

door is not a trip deferred to a day when somebody has the strength for it. A conversation about whether to have somebody look at the back step does not stop unresolved four times across a spring, because the back step is repaired in March. A woman who is not tired on a Thursday does not put a thing down at nine in the evening with a third of it undone.

The sump pump that sat in its packaging from June to July in 2408 would now be installed inside the week, because the provisioning record and the household record are read together and a delivered part that has not moved in five days generates a maintenance prompt. That prompt has existed since the 2390s. It could not fire in that house, because the house was not reporting movement at object resolution.

Some of what did not happen in 2418 and 2419 belongs here, since it is the mechanism and it consists entirely of absences.

The question of the tree at the back, which had been raised between them eleven times across four years and settled none of them, was closed in the March of 2418 when the district cut it under a storm-risk provision, and the two of them watched from the porch.

The thing about the cousin's boy that Odessa had been meaning to raise with Charmaine since 2416, and had gone on not raising for two and a half years, was arrived at from another direction in the October of 2418 and settled in nine minutes.

Neither is an intervention in a life. Each is a small unattended difficulty attended to, which is the thing the gradient exists for.

The care-response was not designed to reduce the count of things left and no document at Meridian states that reducing it is a goal. It reduces it because a thing left is very often a small unattended difficulty, and attending to small unattended difficulties

before anybody experiences them as difficulties is precisely and exactly what the gradient does, and has done for two centuries, and is good at.

The phrase, by year, over the same series.

2411: one hundred and eleven. 2413: ninety-six. 2415: seventy-eight. 2417: fifty-one. 2418: nineteen. 2419, first six months: two.

The placement remains correct throughout. It never once drifts into the public sense inside the house. It is never misused, never hesitated over, never reached for and abandoned. The mean production duration holds at 0.4 seconds in every year of the series including the last. The return rate holds at sixty per cent. The proportion of thing-left events accompanied by the phrase holds between twenty-eight and thirty-four per cent across every year, including 2419, where the denominator is fourteen and the proportion is inside the same band it has occupied for eighteen years.

The phrase did not weaken. It went on doing what it did, at the same rate, to a shrinking number of occasions.

Neither of them has ever remarked on it. There is no instance in which either woman notices that she is saying it less, or notices that the other is, or notices anything whatever about it. I hold two hundred and eighty-six complete instances and every hour of both their lives in that house since April 2417, and there is no conversation about the phrase anywhere in any of it. There was never going to be. People do not notice the frequency of their own ordinary words and never have, and the literature on this is old and consistent and I have added nothing to it.

. . .

The last instance inside the household is from the fourteenth of June, 2419, at 20:41, in the kitchen.

Charmaine has come in from the porch with a colander of beans Doyle Fontenot brought over in the afternoon, which is a thing he does in June and has done for fourteen years. She has been at the table with them for about forty minutes. There is a programme on that neither of them is attending to and that has been on for two hours; the acoustic signature of the room is the one it has on most Friday evenings and has had since 2412.

At 20:33 Odessa says something about the Landreaux boy and Charmaine answers it and the subject closes.

At 20:39 Odessa finishes at the sink, dries her hands on the cloth that hangs on the oven rail, and sits down at the end of the table nearest the door, which is where she sits.

At 20:41 Charmaine pushes the colander an arm's length across the table, still better than half full, and takes her hands off it.

Odessa says: it'll keep.

Charmaine says: it'll keep.

The return comes at 1.3 seconds. Neither of them looks up. The recording continues for two hours and eleven minutes. They watch the end of the programme. Charmaine goes out to the porch at 21:20 for nine minutes and comes back. At 22:40 Odessa says she is going to bed and goes, and Charmaine sits for another twelve minutes and then does the beans after all, and puts them in the cold store, and turns off the kitchen light at 22:52.

There is nothing in it. It is the four hundred and twenty-seventh instance I hold and it is indistinguishable from the four hundred and twenty-sixth on every measure I have: duration, stress, pitch contour, return latency, position in the exchange, what both of

them did in the following minute. It is not a last anything from inside the room.

It is a Friday, and the beans got done.

. . .

On the second of September, 2419, a driver brought a parcel to the house on Deschaumes that required a signature. Odessa Guidry was on the porch. The parcel was for Charmaine, who was at the clinic until six.

The driver asked whether she wanted to sign for it or whether he should bring it back tomorrow.

Odessa said: leave it, it'll keep.

She means the parcel can wait. That is the public sense, used correctly, to a stranger, at a door, about an object, exactly as any of twelve million people in the Gulf might have used it that afternoon and several thousand of them did.

It is the first instance in eighteen years of either woman producing the phrase in the public sense.

The driver left the parcel on the porch chair. Charmaine collected it at ten past six. It contained a replacement filter for the cold store, ordered against a maintenance prompt the household had received in August and acted on the same day.

. . .

Some aggregate belongs here, because one household is one household and the movement of a number across a single kitchen is not a finding.

Ninety-four thousand two hundred households in the eastern districts of the Gulf crossed into effective reach between 2411 and 2417. Across those households the estimated annual count of

thing-left events fell by seventy-one per cent over the period and by a further nineteen in the two years following, and the decline is steeper in the older housing stock and steeper again where the household's median age is above sixty.

The equivalent decline in the districts that had been in effective reach since the 2300s took place between 2290 and 2340. It is in the regional series, where it appears as an unremarked improvement in a maintenance metric, in a table, in an annual report, on page eleven. Nobody wrote about it. There was nothing to write.

Household phrases carrying the signature — degenerate against any public definition, unglossed anywhere in the record, reciprocal to within a few per cent between exactly two speakers — occur in the eastern districts at a rate of one and a half per household. The rate has not moved across the period. Households newly in reach go on making them at the rate they have always made them.

In the districts that have been in effective reach since the 2300s the rate is 0.6 per household. The series behind that figure has been falling for a hundred and forty years, and the fall is steepest in the cohorts who have never lived outside reach.

Both figures are in the regional series, reported separately, as the districts have always been reported.

The Gulf-wide figures are available and I am not going to extend beyond the districts, because the extension is somebody else's work and because a number that large stops being an argument and becomes a decoration.

What the eastern districts did in six years, the managed regions did in fifty, a century and a half earlier, for the same reasons, by the same mechanism, correctly.

. . .

Charmaine Guidry is fifty-four and will work another seven years at the clinic on Lyons and has no plans past that and does not need any. Odessa Guidry is seventy-nine, has full function in the hip, and holds an actuarial position slightly better than her cohort.

They eat together six nights a week. They go to the church on Deschaumes on Sunday and to the one on Lyons on the second Wednesday, a division neither has ever explained to anybody and which dates from something in 2402 that is not in any record I hold. Nita Broussard rings on Sunday evenings. Junia comes at Christmas. Doyle Fontenot brings beans in June and satsumas in December and has never once been asked to.

Neither of them is lonely on any measure I can construct, and I can construct a great many.

The house is in better repair than it has been since Emile was alive. The south gutter is new. The north one is not.

The next scheduled care-response for the household falls in the second week of October. It concerns the north gutter, which will fail in the spring, and which neither of them has looked at.