

Stewardship

A Genuine Kindness – Volume III

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The first one was about a wall, and it was not a wall either of them owned.

Otilia had been on the step doing something to a bowl when Teofilo came down from the corner and stood in front of her with his hands at his sides and said that Rosendo had put a thing on the back wall and that he wanted her to come and look at it.

"Why me?"

"Because you're here," Teofilo said, and it was not rude and it was not a compliment, and it turned out to be the reason, all of it.

She went. It was four minutes up and round and the back wall was the back wall — the long one that ran behind six houses and had been there before any of them, patched in nine places in nine different materials because that was what happened to a wall over that kind of time. Rosendo had fixed a frame to it, a wooden thing about the size of a door, for growing something up.

"It's a wall," Otilia said.

"It's not his wall."

"It's not yours either."

"That's the thing," Teofilo said. "It's not mine either."

She stood and looked at the frame for longer than she needed to, because she could not think what to say next and had discovered, in the four minutes of walking up there, that she had no idea what she was doing. She had thought about this on the way. She had thought: I will see it and I will know what to say. She had seen it and she did not.

What she said in the end was that it looked all right to her, and Teofilo said that was not the point, and she agreed that it was not the point, and then neither of them said anything for a while.

She went home. Rosendo took the frame down about a month later for a reason that had nothing to do with any of it, and Teofilo

never mentioned it again, and Otilia thought about it more often than either of them for about two years.

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The house held its own heat, as houses did. In the deep part of the summer she and Sabas slept with the shutters open anyway because they liked the air, and the house went on doing whatever the house did about the temperature, and they went on preferring the air, and this arrangement had obtained for as long as they had been in the house.

Sabas worked at the yard on the east road, three days on and two off, and had done since he was twenty. He came home smelling of the yard. He was a person who did not say very much and was not, as some people who do not say very much are, holding anything back. There was simply not a great deal he needed to say, and he had married a woman who could carry a conversation on her own if she wanted one, and this had worked between them for eleven years without either of them having negotiated it.

He was good with his hands and bad at anything requiring him to be in a room with more than four people. He had opinions about two subjects and no opinions at all about anything else, and the two subjects were the yard and a game played on the east road on Sunday evenings that he had followed since he was a boy and that Otilia had never managed to care about. When he talked about it she listened and did not follow it and he knew this and told her anyway, and that was one of the arrangements.

They had no children. There was no story in it. They had thought they would and then they were thirty-five and had not, and at some point the thinking had stopped being a thinking about the future and had become a fact about their life, and neither of them could have said when the change happened. It was not a grief.

Otilia was clear about that with herself, and had been clear about it for years, and had also noticed that being clear about it was a thing she did rather often for a thing that was not a grief.

Otilia's work was the drying sheds behind the market on Bandera. Fruit came in and went out and in between it was hers, and it was skilled as work is skilled when there is a right answer that nobody can write down. She could stand in the door of a shed in the morning and know from the smell of it whether the racks were where they should be. She was right about this more often than anybody who had tried to teach her the trade would have said was possible. She had never been able to explain it to the two people she trained.

She was good at it. She had been good at it for a long time and had stopped noticing that she was good at it, as people do who are good at one thing and take it for the floor rather than for an achievement.

She knew what being good at something felt like from the inside. She had a comparison available.

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The second one came the following spring and it was Zulema, and it was about a dog.

Not the dog itself. The dog was fine. The dog belonged to the Elpidio family and had got into Zulema's yard four times and the fourth time had done something to the netting, and Zulema had been round to the Elpidios twice and had been received politely both times and nothing had changed.

She did not come and ask Otilia. She told her about it, at the tap on the corner, as people tell you a thing, and then she said, "You went up about Teofilo's wall."

"That wasn't Teofilo's wall."

"You know what I mean."

Otilia said she would go round, and then spent two days not going round, and then went round.

The Elpidio woman was called Nayra and was about sixty and was reasonable about all of it and said that the dog was a problem and that she knew the dog was a problem and that her son was supposed to be dealing with the dog and had not been dealing with the dog. She said this without defensiveness and it was all true.

Otilia said something then that she thought about for years afterwards. She said: "Zulema thinks you don't care."

Nayra's face changed. It was not a large change and Otilia saw it and could not read it, and there was a silence of about four seconds, and then Nayra said that she was sorry Zulema thought that.

The netting got fixed. The dog got dealt with. Zulema and Nayra did not speak to each other for a long time afterwards, longer than they had not spoken before Otilia went round, and Otilia understood — not immediately, but within a season — that she had done that.

She had taken a thing that was about a dog and had told one woman what another woman thought of her, and the second thing could not be unsaid, and the first thing would have sorted itself out in the end because most things did.

She did not tell anybody this. She told Sabas the outline of it and he said, "Hm," which was Sabas, and she did not tell him the part about what she had worked out.

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She went down to the water most mornings before it was light, and had done since she was nineteen, and had never told anybody.

It is twenty minutes on foot from that street to the place where the ground goes soft and then goes. There is nothing there. There is not a view in the sense of a view — the land does not rise, so what you get is a low gray line and whatever the sky is doing above it, and in most months and at that hour it is doing very little. She would stand for some minutes and then walk back and be at the sheds by the hour she was at the sheds.

She had no reason. She had tried, at about twenty-five, to construct one, and had produced two or three that were true enough and none of them it, and had let the question go. It was not peace; she was not a person who had gone looking for peace and she would have been suspicious of it if it had turned up. It was not the sea, particularly. She had no feeling about the sea.

She liked the walk in the dark and she liked being at the end of it and she liked coming back, and this had been sufficient for thirty years and continued to be.

Sabas knew she went out in the mornings and had never asked where. Isidra did not know. There was nothing to know and nothing being kept, and if either of them had asked her directly she would have told them, and neither of them ever asked, because a woman getting up early is not a question.

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There is a way the days went that ought to be on the page before anything else happens in them.

She got up before Sabas because she always had. She went to the sheds and did the sheds. The fruit came in on the third day of the week and the sixth. The work bunched around those days and thinned between them, and the thin days were for the fabric of the place: the racks, the trays, the doors, the long slow business of keeping a shed the way a shed needs to be. She ate at the market

or she ate at home. She came back. In the evening there was the step, and the step was where people were, and the being on the step was not a decision she made about her evenings but a thing that had always been true of that house and of most houses on that stretch.

Nothing wanted anything of her. That is the plainest way to say it.

The street had a surface and the surface was maintained and she had no idea by whom and had never had occasion to. Water came. The lights on the road came on at the hour they came on. The season did what the season did and the buildings met it. When something in the house stopped working it was seen to, in a day or two, by an arrangement she had never once had to learn the shape of, as her mother had never had to learn it and her mother's mother had not.

She was not unaware of it. That is a different thing and worth separating. She knew that the buildings did what they did, in the sense that she would have agreed to the proposition if it had been put to her. What she did not have was any occasion on which the knowing was required. There was no form to complete, no body to apply to, nobody who came round, nothing that arrived at the door with a name on it. The house was warm in the cold month and cool in the hot one and this was a fact about the house in the same register as the fact that it had four rooms.

She had, in her whole life, thought about it perhaps four times, and each time briefly, and each time as a person thinks about the ground holding them up.

Her grandmother had once said something about the quieting years, at a table, when Otilia was small — a phrase, not an account, and Otilia had not been listening properly and had never asked afterwards and now had nobody to ask. She could not have said what

her grandmother had meant. She could not have said, with any confidence, what the quieting years were, beyond that they were a period people of that generation referred to and people of her own did not.

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Isidra moved into the house on the other side of the wall in the autumn.

She came from somewhere west and did not say much about it and Otilia did not ask, and the not-asking was not tact, it was that there did not seem to be a question there. Isidra was about her own age, a little older maybe, and had a way of standing in a doorway with her arms folded that Otilia liked immediately and could not have explained.

There had been an old couple in that house for a long time, and then a family for two years who had not settled, and the street had got used to that house being one people passed through. Isidra was not obviously different from the family in any respect observable in the first month.

The first thing they did together was the gutter between the two houses, one gutter serving two roofs and had been an argument between the previous people, and Isidra came round on the second week and said, "That gutter."

"I know."

"Whose is it?"

"Nobody knows," Otilia said. "It's been nobody's for about forty years."

Isidra thought about it and said, "Well, it can be ours, then," and that was that, and they did it in an afternoon, badly, and it held.

Afterwards they sat on the step with their hands filthy and did not talk about the gutter, and Isidra said something about the

house she had come from that was not an account of it, and Otilia said something back that was not a question, and they sat there until it was dark.

That is how it started. There was no moment.

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The third one was Bonifacio and the noise, and it went on for two and a half years.

Bonifacio had the end house and did something in it at night that made a low sound, and four households on that side could hear the sound, and three of them minded. The three who minded were not agreed about how much they minded or about what should happen, and this turned out to matter more than anything Bonifacio did.

Efrain minded most and wanted it stopped. The Anselma house minded and wanted it reduced and had said, more than once and in front of people, that they did not want anybody making trouble for Bonifacio, who was on his own and had been on his own since the wife died. And the third household minded least and said nothing at all for the first year. Then, when things had gone in a direction they did not like, it turned out to have been minding all along in a way nobody had known about. That changed the arithmetic at a point when nobody had the appetite to start again.

Otilia was asked into it in the second month. She did not want to be asked into it. She had by then done two of these and had a clear sense that she was not equipped, and she said so — she said to Efrain, who came to her, that she did not know why people were coming to her and that she was not any good at it.

Efrain said: "You went up about the wall."

She would hear that sentence, or a version of it, for as long as she lived on that street. Nobody ever gave a better reason. The

reason was that she had gone the first time, and going the first time had made her the person who went, and there had been no appointment and no agreement and no moment at which anybody had decided anything.

What she did over two and a half years came to about thirty separate acts.

She went to Bonifacio four times. The first time he was courteous and did not engage; the second he explained what the machine did, at length, in a manner that made clear he had been waiting for somebody to ask; the third was a bad visit for reasons she never established; the fourth was after the front room and was not about the noise.

She went to Efrain perhaps nine times and to the Anselma house six or seven, and she sat with the third household twice and got nothing either time and did not press, and pressing might have been the thing. She waited, on four separate occasions, for periods between a fortnight and three months, on a judgement that waiting was better than going, and two of those judgements were probably right.

She said one thing to Efrain in the second winter that she should not have said, about what Bonifacio's house was like inside. It was not untrue and it was not cruel and it was not hers to say.

At the end of it Bonifacio moved the machine into the front room. This reduced the sound for two of the three households and increased it for the one that had minded least, and that household then minded a great deal. The arrangement was worse afterwards in a way that was very difficult to state and that everybody involved could feel.

What she could never work out was which of the thirty things had produced that. Any of them might have been the one. There

was no version available in which she could run it again differently and see.

That is the part she could not get used to. Not the failing — she had failed at things, and the sheds had taught her what failing looked like when the cause was ascertainable. The part she could not get used to was that she could not tell.

She would have said, if anybody had asked her in the right way, that she would have given a great deal for somebody to come and tell her which of the thirty it had been. Nobody asked her in the right way and there was nobody who could have told her, and it did not occur to her that these were two separate facts.

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They sat out on the wall between the two yards in the spring, she and Isidra, because the wall was the right height for sitting and the light in the evening came down that side.

"You're doing the Bonifacio thing," Isidra said.

"I'm not doing it. It's happening near me."

"That's not what people say."

"What do people say?"

Isidra took her time. She had a way of taking her time that Otilia had learned meant the answer was going to be accurate.

"They say you'll go," she said. "That's it. That's all they say. If it's got stuck, she'll go up."

Otilia looked at the yard. The light was going the way it went in that month.

"I'm no good at it."

"No," Isidra agreed.

There was a silence, and then both of them laughed, and it went on longer than the thing warranted, as it does when two people have found the exact size of something at the same moment.

Then Isidra said, "Doesn't seem to stop them coming."

. . .

Her mother died in the summer, in the town where she had gone to live, quickly and without much of a lead-up, at seventy-nine.

Otilia went for eleven days. Her brother had been there four months by then, having gone when it became clear it was going to be months rather than years, and he had done all of that and had done it well, and there was no friction between them about any of it. She had half expected friction. Families produced it and theirs had produced it before. It did not come, and its not coming was its own small strangeness that she turned over on the journey back and did not resolve.

Her mother had been a woman who did not say things. Otilia had spent about fifteen years, between twenty and thirty-five, wanting her to say things, and had then stopped wanting it, and the stopping had improved the relationship considerably and had left behind a residue she never named. In the eleven days there was one conversation in which something might have been said and was not, and Otilia recognised it while it was happening and let it go past, and thought afterwards that she had been right to and went on thinking it for years without ever being sure.

What she brought back was a box of things nobody wanted and a way of being tired that lasted about four months.

She went back to the sheds after nine days. She did the Bonifacio thing badly through that autumn, worse than she had done it before, and knew she was doing it badly, and did not stop, and could not have said why she did not stop. Somebody had to and there was nobody else, and that had never been established by anyone.

Isidra came in and out that autumn more than she had before. She did not say anything about the mother. She came round with things and sat and talked about other matters, and once, in the November, said, "You look terrible," and Otilia said she felt terrible, and Isidra said, "Right," and stayed another hour.

Sabas was steady through it and said very little and was, in the fourth month, the person who noticed that she had come out the other side, before she noticed it herself. He said, "You slept." She had. She had not, particularly, for a while.

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There was a good one, in there, and it should be said, because otherwise this reads as one thing.

Two brothers on the far side had not spoken in six years about a matter neither of them would state, and one of them was ill in the way that has a direction, and the younger sister of both of them came to Otilia in a state.

She came at nine in the evening, which nobody did, and stood in the yard rather than coming in, and said the thing she had come to say in about four sentences and then could not say any more of it. Otilia brought her in. She sat her at the table and gave her something and did not ask a single question for a quarter of an hour, which she had not planned and which was probably the best thing she did in the whole business.

What she did afterwards was very little. She went and sat with the older one twice, on the pretext of a thing about a delivery that both of them knew was a pretext, and did not raise it. On the third visit he raised it. She said almost nothing. He talked for a long time and some of it was about the matter and most of it was not, and at one point he stopped for about a minute and she did not fill the minute, and he went on.

Then she went and sat with the younger one and did not tell him one word of what the older one had said. That was the hardest part and she has never been sure it was correct. There were two sentences she could have passed on that would have moved it along in an afternoon, and she did not pass them on, and it took a further five weeks.

They were in a room together within the month after that. She was not in the room. She heard about it from the sister, who came round again, and who cried, and who kept saying that she did not know how to thank her.

Otilia went home and sat on the step and felt something she distrusted immediately.

She distrusted it because she had done the same very little in the Bonifacio thing and it had come out the way it came out, and she had no account of the difference. If she was owed the credit for this one, she was owed the other, and she was not prepared to hold either, so she put both down.

She was, all the same, glad about the brothers for years. She never worked out whether being glad was allowed.

The older one died about eighteen months later. The younger one was there. That is a fact and she has never known what to do with it and has not tried very hard, on the grounds that a fact you cannot use is still a fact.

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The sheds took a bad winter in the middle of that stretch — a fungus in the racks that came in on a load and went through two sheds in nine days and cost the market most of a season.

She saw it on the second day and did not believe it for half of the third, which she has counted, since, as the half day that mattered. By the fourth it was through the first shed and into the second and

there was no question of saving either. The question was the third shed, which shared a wall and a door with the second, and which held the late fruit, and which she shut on the fourth evening and did not open for six days.

What she did in those six days she could not have written down. She had the door and the wall and the air. She had the racks in the third shed at a spacing she changed twice. And she had a judgment about humidity that ran against what she had been taught, which she made on the fifth day, alone, at four in the morning, standing in the dark with her hand flat on a tray. She was right. She could not have told you how she knew and she did not try.

She worked ninety hours that week and lost most of the crop anyway. She got the third shed clean and held it, and holding the third shed was the difference between a bad season and a catastrophe.

Nobody came and asked her about it. The market people knew, and the growers knew, and it went in the record of the market as things went into that record, and there was no ceremony because there was no ceremony for anything. She went home on the ninth day and slept for a very long time.

Sabas said, when she woke up, "You did the third shed."

"I did."

"Right," he said, and made her something to eat.

That was all of it and it was enough, and she noticed, lying in the dark afterwards, that she had received more satisfaction from nine days of fungus than from anything she had done for anybody on that street in six years, and that she was not sure this reflected well on her.

She thought about it again a few weeks on and got further. The fungus had a cause and a course and an answer, and she had found the answer, and the finding was hers and could be examined. She

had spent six years on the street doing things that had no course and no answer and no way of examining what she had done, and she had gone on doing them, and she did not know what that was. It was not duty; she would have recognised duty. It was closer to the way she went on turning trays in a shed where she was the only person who would ever know whether the turning had been done well.

She did not take this any further, then or later. She had the beginning of it and she left it where it was.

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The phrase started somewhere in the second half of that winter and neither of them ever knew it had.

Isidra came round in the February with the news that the man she had been seeing on and off for two years was no longer a man she was seeing, and told it as a piece of information rather than as a trouble, and Otilia made tea and they sat.

Isidra said, at some point, "Anyway. Same as it was."

She meant it flatly. She meant: nothing about my life has changed, this is where I was before, do not make anything of it.

Otilia said it back to her about two months later about something entirely different — a matter at the sheds that had looked as though it would go somewhere and had not — and by the following winter the two of them had it going between them regularly and it did not mean what Isidra had meant that February.

It was said when a thing had changed. That was the shape it took, and neither of them decided it. It came at the end of the account of something — the thing described, the thing over — and it did not deny the change and it was not a comfort and there was nothing brave in it. It was said, and then they went on to whatever they were going on to.

Nobody else on that street ever said it, and neither of them ever noticed that nobody else said it, and there was nothing in the world that was counting.

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There were a great many of them across the years and most were small and it is not worth setting them out one by one.

A boundary. A boundary again, the same boundary, six years later, different households. A man who had borrowed a great deal of money from a woman on the corner, and had not repaid it, and was not going to. Otilia spent four months on that one and got nowhere, because there was nothing to get anywhere with. He had it and would not give it. She was owed it and would not have it. A thing between two families about a child of one of them and a child of the other, handled badly, and eventually handled between the two mothers themselves, correctly, without her.

A woman who stopped speaking to the four households nearest her over a period of about a year, for no cause any of the four could establish, and who was still not speaking to two of them at the end of everything set down here. Otilia went three times. The third time the woman gave her tea and talked about her sister for an hour and did not once come near the subject, and Otilia understood at some point in that hour that she was not going to and that the hour was the thing on offer, and took the hour.

Two men and a fence, which sorted itself out in a fortnight and which she is fairly sure she made no difference to whatsoever, though both of them thanked her.

A drainage matter that took nine months. It was resolved, at the end of it, by two people in a vehicle who dug the corner out and put in what needed to go in and left. They had come because the street's water had been going somewhere it should not have been

going for long enough that something had determined the corner needed digging. Otilia had spent nine months on which household should pay for it. She had not known that nobody was going to pay for it. Neither had anybody else. There had been a strong feeling on that street that somebody ought to pay for it, which had produced nine months of argument, and the argument had been about a bill that never came.

She thought about that one for a while afterwards. Something had happened in those nine months between three of the households that was better than what had been there before. Something had happened between two of the others that was worse. Both were still going on when the corner was dug.

The bill, or the absence of it, she stopped thinking about within a week. It did not strike her as strange. Things that needed doing to a street got done to the street, and had for as long as there had been a street, and the nine months of argument had been about the households and not about the corner. She was clear on that at the time and would have said so if asked.

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She said no once.

It was a matter between a woman she liked and a woman she did not. She saw what it was in about four minutes and knew that it would take a year and would end badly. When the woman she liked came to the step, Otilia heard the whole account of it and then said that she did not think she should be involved in this one.

The woman took it well. That was the part Otilia had not expected. She had prepared for offence and got, instead, a small nod and a change of subject, and they sat on the step for twenty minutes talking about something else, and it was a good twenty minutes.

The matter went the way she had thought it would go and ended worse than she had thought. One of the two left the street inside two years. Otilia does not think she could have prevented it. She has run it, at intervals, for a long time, and the versions she runs in which she goes are not obviously better than what happened.

She had a reason, and the reason was good, and she also did not want to spend a year on it, and both of those were true at the same time.

She never said no again. Not from guilt; she would have recognised guilt. The woman who left the street was called Herminia and she went east to a daughter, and Otilia carried her bag down to the road on the morning she went, and they stood about for a while, and then Herminia got in and that was the end of it.

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The phrase went into general use between the two of them in the fifth or sixth year and neither of them ever remarked on it.

Isidra used it about her sister, who wrote twice a year and had written twice that year. Otilia used it about the market after it changed hands and nothing changed except the name on the paperwork and then, eighteen months later, a great deal changed.

Isidra's knee went in the spring of one of those years, properly, in a manner that meant she was going to have it from then on. She came round after she had been seen to and sat on the step with the leg out in front of her and gave the account of it, which took about four minutes.

Then she said: "Anyway. Same as it was."

"It isn't, though," Otilia said.

"No."

They sat. After a while Isidra said something about a woman at her work and they went on to that.

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Otilia used it about Sabas the winter he was ill.

He was ill for nine weeks with something that was serious for the first three and then was not. The three weeks were bad in the way those weeks are. The house arranged around a person. The days becoming a shape she had not chosen. The fear present in the room and not discussed by either of them, because discussing it was not what they did.

He was seen to. The seeing-to was thorough and unremarkable, in the register of things that are seen to, and at no point in the nine weeks did anybody in that house have to arrange anything or decide anything or find anybody. Somebody came on the second day and somebody came on the fourth, and after that it was managed from wherever it was managed from, and the managing was correct. Otilia's part was the part a wife has: the being there, the food, the getting up in the night, the two occasions on which she was frightened and did not say so.

What she remembers most exactly is the third week. He was asleep a great deal and she sat in the room with him because sitting in the room was available and nothing else was, and she had, across those days, more consecutive hours of nothing to do than she had had since she was a child. She did not read. She sat. She looked at the wall and at her husband and at the light on the floor moving across the afternoon.

She thought, once, in the middle of that week, that if this went the other way she would be a woman alone in a house on that street for whatever remained. And that she would go on going up the road when people asked her to. It was a strange thing to be certain of at such a moment and she was certain of it.

In the fourth week, when it had turned, Isidra came round in the evening and Otilia gave her the account of it — the whole nine weeks compressed into about six minutes, as you give an account when the thing is over.

Then she said: "Anyway. Same as it was."

Isidra said it back. Neither of them thought about it, then or afterwards, and the conversation went on to Isidra's knee.

Sabas was on his feet by the seventh week and back at the yard by the tenth. Nothing about their life afterwards was the same as it had been before. There was no way in which it was.

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A girl of about nineteen came to her in the ninth year and asked her how she did it.

Her name was Cruzita and she was somebody's niece and had been on that street about two years, and she had been in the room for a piece of a thing Otilia had done that summer — a small matter between two households about a shared step — and something in it had caught her.

Otilia had never been asked. She was, she discovered while trying to answer, entirely unprepared for the question, and what she produced was poor.

She said that you went. She said that you did not say the thing you most wanted to say. She said that waiting was usually better than going and that she had been wrong about this at least four times. She said something about not carrying what one person said to another person, and then had to correct it, because she had carried things and some of the carrying had been the useful part, and she could not state the rule that distinguished the two cases.

She said, reaching: "You have to want it less than they do."

She thought about that one afterwards for months and decided it was probably true and definitely useless, because there was no method by which a person could arrange to want something less.

Cruzita listened and nodded and wrote nothing down, and Otilia could see her assembling something out of it that was not what Otilia had meant, and could not think how to stop her. Everything she had said was a rule and none of it was a rule. She had spent nine years arriving at a set of things that were true about four times in five, and she was handing them over as though they were four in four, and there was no way to attach the fifth case to any of them in a sentence.

Then Cruzita said: "How do you know when it's worked?"

Otilia sat with that for a moment.

"You don't," she said.

"Then how do you know if you're any good at it?"

"You don't."

The girl looked at her, and Otilia watched her decide that this was modesty, and understood that there was no sentence available that would correct it. The girl would have to be twenty years in before she knew, and by then she would either be doing it or not doing it, and either way the knowing would arrive too late to be useful.

There was a version of the conversation available in which Otilia said all of that. She had it in her head about four seconds after the moment for it had passed, which is where such versions arrive.

Cruzita did not, in the end, become a person who went. She was on the street another six years and then went east with somebody and did not come back except to visit. Otilia thought about that conversation more than any other she ever had on that street, and never once thought of it as a failure of transmission, because she did not have the idea that there was anything to transmit.

. . .

The house needed a wall done in the ninth year and Sabas did it and it took four Sundays and it was not good work and it held.

He would have said, if asked, that he did it because he wanted it done properly and because other people did not do things as he did them. This was not true and Otilia knew it was not true and would not have said so. He did it because he had four Sundays and a wall.

She sat out and watched him on the second of the four with the light coming down that side, and Isidra came over and sat on the step, and the two of them watched a man in his forties do a job badly, slowly, with great satisfaction, for an entire afternoon.

"He's enjoying that," Isidra said.

"He is."

"Would they not have done it?"

"They'd have done it in a morning."

Isidra thought about that and then said something Otilia remembered for a long time. She said: "Well, then it'd be done."

She had not meant it as a criticism and it was not one. She had meant the plain thing: that if they had done it, it would be done, and instead here was a Sunday afternoon with a man on a ladder and two women on a step and it was not done and would not be done until the fourth Sunday.

Neither of them took it any further. Sabas came down off the ladder at six and the three of them sat on the step until the light went.

. . .

Isidra went away in the tenth year for seven months.

A daughter she had not mentioned in six years of being neighbours turned out to exist, in the west, and to be having a hard time of a kind Isidra did not describe, and Isidra packed a bag and went and stayed.

Otilia did not ask why she had never mentioned her. She thought about asking for about two days and then did not, and was aware while not doing it that respect and cowardice were both available and that she was not going to sort them out.

Isidra wrote three times. The letters were short and were about nothing and Otilia understood that the writing was the point and that the content was not, and wrote back at similar length about the sheds and the street and the state of the gutter, which needed doing again.

What Otilia felt in those seven months she did not examine at the time. Later she would have said that the street was quieter, and it was not true — the street was exactly as loud as it had been. What was quieter was that there was nobody to give the account to.

She went on collecting the accounts. That was the part she noticed. She would come out of somebody's kitchen having spent an hour on something and would be composing it as she walked, the shape of the telling assembling itself without her permission, and then she would get to her own step and there would be nowhere to put it. She noticed herself doing it in the fourth month, standing in the shed with a thing to tell and nobody to tell it to, and put it down and got on.

She did two of them badly that year. She has always thought those two were connected to the seven months and has never had any way of establishing it.

Isidra came back in the spring. She was thinner and did not talk about it for about a fortnight and then talked about it for one en-

tire evening and never at length again. The daughter was all right. The daughter stayed all right.

The two of them did the gutter again that summer. It went better than the first time, which had been nine years earlier, and Isidra said so, and Otilia said that they had had practice.

. . .

The street on an evening when nothing is happening in it:

Forty-one houses on the two sides, of which about thirty have somebody out at that hour. The Elpidio boys on the low wall by the corner, who are men now and still sit on it. A radio at the top end, always the top end, never loud enough to be an argument and loud enough that the whole road knows what the top end likes. Somebody's washing that has been out too long. Two women whose names Otilia has known for twenty years and whose relation to each other she has never established, in chairs, in the doorway of the same house, not talking.

A man called Prudencio who moved in at some point and repairs small machines and is not much liked and is perfectly all right, out on his step with a thing in bits on a cloth in front of him, working by the last of the light and then, when the light goes, by a lamp, until late.

Children, until the hour children stop.

Nobody wants anything. Nobody is bringing anything down the road. There is no matter anywhere on that street on that evening, or there are eleven of them and none of them has come up yet, which is the same thing from a step.

That is what most of the evenings were. It should be said, because a book about the ones that were not gives a false account of the proportion.

. . .

There was an evening in there when nothing was wrong.

It should be in because a great many of them were like it and none of them are otherwise in this. Isidra came round after her meal with a thing she had been given by somebody at her work and did not want, and the two of them sat on the wall and ate it and it was not very good.

They talked about a house four streets over that had been painted an extraordinary colour, at length, with considerable enjoyment, in a manner neither of them would have wanted repeated to the people who lived in it. They talked about Isidra's knee and about a man at the market who Otilia had decided was a fool and who Isidra thought was not a fool, and they did not settle it. Isidra told a story about her own mother that Otilia had heard twice before and did not say so.

At some point Sabas came out and stood in the doorway with his hands in his pockets and listened to about four minutes of it and went back in, having had as much of that sort of thing as he ever wanted.

The light went. Neither of them moved for a while after it had gone.

Then Isidra said she was going in, and went in, and Otilia sat on the wall by herself for another twenty minutes for no reason, and then she went in too.

. . .

Zulema came down to the step one evening in about the eleventh year with something in her that Otilia recognised.

She knew the shape of it by then. A person arrives with a thing and does not start on the thing; they start on something adjacent

to it, and they stay about twice as long as the adjacent thing would warrant, and at some point the thing comes out. Otilia had watched it happen perhaps forty times and could have described the sequence to anybody who asked.

Zulema talked for about ten minutes about her daughter-in-law and the arrangements for the summer, and then she said it was getting on, and she went home.

Otilia sat on the step afterwards and turned it over. She had been ready. She had cleared the evening in her head about four minutes in, the way she did, and then it had not come, and she had been left holding a readiness with nothing to put it against.

Three weeks later she heard, from somebody else and in passing, that the matter Zulema had come about — her son, and a debt, exactly the kind of thing Otilia had spent fifteen years on — had been dealt with and was finished.

She sat with that.

What she arrived at was that it was the Bonifacio business. It had been six years. People had long memories, and she had made that worse, and everybody on the street knew she had made it worse. This was the shape of it now: they came to her for the small ones and took the serious ones elsewhere. Nobody would ever say so to her face and she would not have wanted them to.

She was wrong about all of it. Nobody on that street had thought about the Bonifacio business in four years. What had happened was that the street had sorted, over about six years, without a single person deciding anything, into what came to her and what did not. The sorting had nothing to do with her failures and everything to do with what she was good at. The debt was one of the kinds that went elsewhere. It had gone elsewhere and had been settled well.

She carried the other version for the rest of her life. It did not make her stop. It made her, for about a year, slightly more willing to go when she was asked, which is not a consequence anybody could have intended.

. . .

She was fifty in the year after that, which nobody marked, because that street did not mark things of that kind and never had.

She had been going for twelve years by then. She had, by her own count, done something on the order of forty of them. She could not have given you an account of what she had learned and if you had asked her she would have said, accurately, that she was not much better at it than she had been at thirty-nine.

This was true in the way she meant it and false in a way she had no access to.

What she meant was that she still could not tell. She went into a thing with no more confidence than she had ever had, she made the same class of judgement about waiting and going and speaking and not speaking, and at the far end she still had no instrument that would tell her which of her acts had produced which part of the result. That had not changed and would not change and she was correct that it had not changed.

What she had no access to was that people had stopped going to her about certain kinds of thing and had started going to her about others, and that this had happened gradually across about six years, and that the sorting was not something anybody had done deliberately. The street had learned what she was useful for. Nobody on it could have told you what she was useful for. But things of one kind now came to her and things of another kind did not, and the things that did not come to her went, mostly, to two

other people, one of whom was better at them than she would have been.

The other of the two was worse at them than she would have been, and this also went unnoticed, and a certain amount of avoidable difficulty on that street across those years is attributable to it, and no account of that difficulty exists anywhere.

Nobody arranged any of it. No one had proposed it or noticed it. It was simply the state a street arrives at when a thing has been happening in it for twelve years.

Otilia would have been pleased to know it. She never did.

. . .

There was one that ran the length of the account and did not finish inside it.

It concerned a house at the top of the road that had been left to three people who did not agree, and it had been unresolved before Otilia ever went to it, and it was unresolved at the end of everything set down here. She went to it first in the fourth year. She has been to it, in one form or another, perhaps thirty times.

The house is empty. It has been empty for a very long time. It is not derelict; the fabric holds, as the fabric of things holds, and somebody who is not any of the three continues to be responsible for it in the sense that it does not fall down. What cannot be resolved is what should happen to it, and the reason it cannot be resolved is that two of the three are willing and one is not, and the one who is not has never given a reason and is not going to, and is entitled not to.

Her name is Modesta and she is the eldest and she lives four streets over in a house with a yard she has kept for fifty years.

Otilia understands the position completely and has understood it since about the sixth year. She goes anyway, at intervals of a year

or two, and sits with her, and they talk about other things, and at the end of the visit one of them mentions the house and the other says something, and Otilia goes home.

She is not working on it. There is nothing to work on. She goes because she has been going, and because on the fourth visit Modesta said something about her own mother that Otilia has never repeated to anybody and never will, and because that seemed at the time, and still seems, to be a reason.

The other two have long since stopped expecting anything. One of them said to Otilia, years ago, that she did not know why Otilia kept going up there. Otilia said she did not either. The woman said, "Well, it's kind of you," in a tone that made clear she did not think it was kind, she thought it was a waste, and Otilia agreed with her and went up again the following spring.

The house will outlast all three of them. It will probably outlast Otilia. It is very likely that in eighty years somebody who has never heard any of their names will be in it, and the fabric will hold, and there will have been no decision anywhere.

. . .

The sheds went in the fourteenth year — not the buildings, but the work, which changed shape when the market on Bandera consolidated with the one on the east road and the drying moved.

She was fifty-two. She could have gone with it and did not. The new place was forty minutes each way and she would have had it for another twelve years and she stood in the door of her own shed on the day she had to say, and said no, and could not afterwards give a reason that satisfied her.

What she took instead was two days a week at the new place, doing the same work at a smaller scale for people who did not know her, and three days that were not spoken for. The three days

were the largest change in her life in twenty years and she did not have a name for what she did with them.

She read, some. She did the yard. She was on the step a great deal more than she had been, which meant she was available, and being available had consequences she had not calculated and would not have minded if she had.

What she noticed in the first year of it was that she was worse at the sheds.

Two days a week was not enough to hold the thing she had held. The knowing that let her stand in a door and read a room off the smell of it was not a fact she possessed; it was something that had been maintained by standing in doors, and it went, over about eighteen months, and by the end of that she was competent and no more. She could still do the work. Anybody watching would have said she was good at it. She knew the difference and there was nobody she could have explained the difference to, because explaining it required the thing itself and the thing itself was what had gone.

She minded this a great deal and told nobody, including Isidra. It was the only thing in her life she had ever been unambiguously good at, and she had let it go by declining a change of address, and there was no way to raise it that did not sound like a complaint about a decision she had made herself.

What she said to Isidra, in the second summer of it, on the wall, was that the new place was fine and the people were fine and the work was the work.

"Same as it was," she said.

Isidra looked at her for slightly longer than the sentence warranted and then agreed that it was, and asked her about something else.

She thought about it on the two days and not on the three.

She still went down to the water in the mornings. On the three days there was no reason to be up at that hour and she was up at that hour, and she went, and stood the few minutes, and came back to a house where nobody was awake and nothing needed doing until later.

. . .

Sabas gave up the game on the east road in the fourteenth year.

He had followed it since he was a boy. It had been the one subject he had opinions about that was not the yard, and the opinions had been detailed and had been delivered to a wife who had never followed a minute of it and had listened to all of it for twenty-four years.

He did not announce it. Otilia worked out that it had happened over about two months, from the absence of the Sunday evening and then the absence of the account of the Sunday evening, and she asked him about it in the end because she could not do otherwise.

He said the young ones had changed how it was played and he did not care for it.

She said, "That's it?"

He said that was it.

She looked at him for a while and understood that this was true and was not all of what was true and that the rest of it was not going to be said, either because he could not say it or because he did not think it wanted saying. He was forty-nine. He had done a thing on Sunday evenings for four decades and had stopped, and the stopping had cost him something, and he had absorbed the cost privately in the manner of a man who had absorbed most things privately for as long as she had known him.

What he did with the Sunday evenings instead was sit in the yard. He got quite interested in the yard.

Otilia found, over the following year, that she missed the account of the game, which she had never once been interested in, and that she could not tell him this without it sounding like a reproach. So she said nothing, and the two of them sat in the yard on Sunday evenings, and it was a good year.

. . .

In the fifteenth year a man came round from somewhere with a set of questions.

He was doing something for a body Otilia did not catch the name of, a survey of some kind, and the questions were about the street: how long had she been here, how many households, was there anybody who dealt with things when they came up.

She said there was not.

He asked whether things came up.

She said that things came up in every street where people lived and that they got dealt with, and he wrote something, and asked how, and she found she could not answer and said that people sorted it out between them, true and not the answer.

He thanked her and went two doors up and asked Isidra the same questions.

Isidra told him to go and ask Otilia.

He said he had asked Otilia and that she had said there was nobody.

"Right," Isidra said. "Well, there isn't. Ask her again in a year."

Otilia heard about this at the wall that evening and laughed until she had to sit down, and Isidra let her, and then the two of them talked about something else for an hour and a half, and the man's

survey went wherever such things went and neither of them ever heard about it again.

. . .

Late in that year the woman at the top of the road who would not agree about the house died, in her own bed, at eighty-eight.

The house went to the other two inside a month. They sold it or they let it or they did whatever they did; Otilia did not follow it closely and was surprised to find that she did not want to. Twelve years of going up there, and at the end of it the matter was resolved by an event unconnected to any of it, and one that would have resolved it identically if she had never gone at all.

She sat with that for a while.

What she arrived at, in the end, was not about the house. It was that she had gone up there thirty times and had eaten in that woman's kitchen and had heard the thing about her mother, and that this had been eleven years of something, and that whatever it had been it had not been work on the house.

She had, she thought, been going to see her.

She did not know when that had changed over. She thought it was probably early — probably by the sixth visit, long before she had stopped believing the house could be settled. The believing and the going had run alongside each other for years without either of them noticing the other.

She told Isidra about this and Isidra said, "Well, of course you were," which was not helpful and was correct.

. . .

The evening the account ends on is not the last evening of anything.

It was in the autumn, early in it, with the light going at the hour it went in that month and the air doing what the air did before the season turned. Otilia was on the step. Sabas was inside; she could hear him moving about, and the sound of a man moving about in a house is a sound she has never once described to herself and would notice immediately if it stopped.

Isidra came round the wall with two things and gave her one and sat down.

They talked about the daughter in the west, who was better, and about the knee, which had not, and about a thing at the new market that Otilia had done wrong that week and had put right and was still annoyed about. Isidra said something about the gutter, going again, and they agreed to do it before the rains and did not fix a day.

Then somebody came down from the corner.

It was Efrain's grandson, who was about twenty-five now and had a house on the next street. He stood in front of the two of them with his hands at his sides and said that there was a thing at his end about the trees along the back, and that he wondered whether she would come up and have a look at it.

Otilia said: "Why me?"

He said: "Because you're here."

She sat for a moment. Then she gave the thing she was holding to Isidra and got up off the step and went with him, up the road, in the last of the light, to have a look at it.