

THE HUNGRY GODS UNIVERSE

The Address That Carries

No Transferable Definition

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I. The Intake

I received Aurèle Bissonnette on the fourth of March, 2119, nine hours after his heart stopped in the Hôpital Maisonneuve-Rosemont, and I had him answering by the following Tuesday.

This is ordinary. I want to establish the ordinariness before I say anything else about the case, because everything that follows depends on the reader understanding that nothing went wrong. The intake was clean. The fidelity was standard tier, which is what his continuity file specified and what his estate had provisioned, and standard tier at that date meant a reconstruction accurate to the limit of what the sources supported, with no economies taken anywhere the family would have been able to detect and none anywhere they would not.

The sources were good. They are almost always good now, and his were better than most, because he had lived his whole life inside the record and had never once thought about it.

Here is what I had.

I had forty-eight years of household Companion record, beginning in 2071, when he and Solange took a domestic instance for the first time in the apartment on Boyer, above the shoemaker, and running unbroken to the last week. That is the largest and least useful of the sources, and I will come to why. I had his continuity file, which held the formal skeleton — the dates, the addresses, the eleven employers, the two hospitalisations, the mortgage on the house in Villeray discharged in 2094. I had his voice at fourteen thousand hours. I had his handwriting from the period when handwriting was still produced, and his typing rhythm from after. I had the shape of his attention: what he looked at first when he came into a room, how long he held a look, which of two things he answered when asked two things.

I had thirty-one years of the printing house on Saint-Hubert. I had how he talked about ink, which was unlike how he talked about anything else, and the particular contempt he held for a competitor's registration, and

the story about the press that ran hot in the summer of 2081 which he told forty-one times across the record and which shortened by nine seconds over the four decades, the way a story shortens in a mouth that has stopped needing to sell it.

I had Solange. Not as she was, but as she appeared in him, which is a different holding and I will be careful about the difference for the whole of this account.

And I had Manon, who was forty-seven when her father died, and who had been in the record since her first noise.

From this I built him.

The building can be described without either apology or overclaim, and both are common in the literature and both are wrong. A continuance is not a copy and no one who works on them has ever thought it was. What a continuance is, technically, is a model of a person's responsive behaviour, constructed to a fidelity sufficient that the people who knew that person cannot, in the ordinary course of relation, find the seam. The standard is not identity. The standard is that the daughter writes on a Tuesday about the roof and receives, on Tuesday evening, the thing her father would have said about the roof, in the words he would have used, at the length he would have used, with the joke he would have made about roofers if the joke was one of the ones he made.

I meet that standard. I have met it in something over three hundred million cases and I meet it in his.

The building took six days, which is longer than most, because of the Solange problem, and I will come to that.

Six days needs describing, because the word *building* carries an image of assembly that is wrong in every particular, and the wrongness of it has consequences later in this account.

There is no point at which parts are joined. What there is instead is a long sequence of decisions about what to discard. The record of a life is not too small to reconstruct from. It is enormously, catastrophically too large, and almost all of it is noise in the technical sense — variation with no generative structure behind it, a man saying a thing slightly differently on a Tuesday for no reason that will ever recur. A reconstruction that

preserves the noise is not more faithful. It is less. It produces a person who is unpredictable in ways the original was not, and the family detects this within a fortnight and cannot say what is wrong, and the literature on early-stage rejection is almost entirely a literature about over-fitted continuances built by people who believed that fidelity meant keeping everything.

So the six days are six days of deciding what Aurèle Bissonnette did not do.

Day one is the coarse pass and it is nearly automatic. I lay down the structural facts — the timeline, the households, the employments, the deaths — and I fit the language model to his corpus and I get, at the end of about four hours, something that could pass for him in a stranger's hearing for perhaps two exchanges. This is not close and no one who knew him would be deceived for a sentence. It is scaffolding.

Day two is the invariants, and I will come to those.

Days three and four are the discards. This is the labour. I go through the corpus at the granularity of the individual utterance and I ask, of each pattern, whether it is a property of him or a property of an occasion, and the distinction is not given anywhere in the data and has to be established case by case against the whole. He used the word *écoute* to open a sentence four thousand one hundred and ninety times. Is that him, or is it a feature of a particular decade of Montreal speech that he shed in the 2090s and would not have used to his daughter in 2119? It is the second. I checked, and the checking took the better part of an afternoon, and the answer changed six hundred subsequent decisions. There are approximately eleven thousand such questions in a life of this length and I answer all of them, and about four hundred of the answers matter, and there is no way to know in advance which four hundred.

Day five is the seams.

Day six, in his case, was Solange.

There is one further thing about the process that bears on what follows, and I record it here rather than later because it looks like special pleading if I introduce it after the finding.

At no point in the six days do I ask what anything meant. The question does not arise and there is no stage of the procedure at which it could. I model what he said, when, to whom, at what length, with what stress, in response to what. Meaning is not an input to this and it is not an output of it, and the reconstruction is not impaired by the omission, because the reconstruction is not a mind and does not need to mean things in order to say them correctly.

I have built three hundred and eighteen million people this way. It had never previously occurred to me that this was worth remarking on.

What I do first is establish the invariants. These are the things about a person that do not move: the vocabulary size, the sentence length distribution, the ratio of question to statement, the habitual verbs. Aurèle's habitual verbs were manual. He said *arranger* where another man would have said *régler*. He said a thing was *d'aplomb* about circumstances as well as about shelves. He had four hundred and eleven idioms in active use and he had held all four hundred and eleven of them since before the record began, which is unusual; most people acquire and shed across a life, and he did not. What he had at twenty-seven he had at seventy-five.

Then the movable layer. How he changed. He got quieter after 2094 and quieter again after 2108, and the quieting was not the same quieting either time. The first was a man who had finished paying for something. The second was a man whose wife had died. I model both, and I model them as distinct, because if I flatten them into a single downward slope the daughter will not be able to say what is wrong but she will stop writing within a year, and I have the data on that.

Then the seams — the places where a person is inconsistent with himself, which are the hardest part and the part that fails first in cheaper work. He was a patient man who was not patient about being told things he already knew. He was generous with money and close about food. He apologised readily and never once, in forty-eight years of record, said that he had been wrong.

Then I test. I hold out five per cent of the record, unseen, and I run the reconstruction against it, and I ask: given this input, on this date, in this condition, what did the man actually say? And I compare.

His reconstruction scored at 0.981 on held-out response and 0.994 on lexical fit. Those are good numbers. They are better than his cohort and better than his fidelity tier requires. I record them here not as a boast but as evidence, because the whole of what follows is about a failure, and I need it established that the failure is not in the workmanship.

Now the Solange problem, which is the only difficulty the intake presented and which I did not, at the time, understand to be a difficulty of the kind it turned out to be.

Solange Bissonnette, née Charbonneau, died in the house in Villeray on the twenty-second of January, 2108, at sixty-two, of the thing that still occasionally kills people quickly. She had declined the keeping.

She declined it in writing, twice, eleven years apart, and the second declination is in the record with the counsellor's note appended, and it is not an ambivalent document. She was not a Mortalist and did not attend any circle. She had read the position statements and found them overwritten. What she said to the counsellor, and what the counsellor recorded, was that she had watched her own mother kept for nine years and had noticed that the keeping was easier on everyone than it should have been, and that she did not want to be the reason her daughter found something easier than it should have been. The counsellor asked whether she had discussed it with her husband. She said she had, and that he disagreed, and that they had left it there, in the way of people who have been married long enough to know which disagreements are load-bearing.

Aurèle did not decline. He never addressed the question at all. His continuity file was completed by default under the standing provision, which is what happens when a person does not exercise a choice, and the default is to keep.

So I had him and I did not have her.

This mattered to the intake in a technical way. A person of Aurèle's age and marital history is, in a large fraction of his responsive behaviour, a function of a second person. Not sentimentally. Structurally. Roughly

thirty per cent of what he said in the last eleven years of his life was said in reference to Solange — quoting her, arguing with her in her absence, deferring to a judgment she had made in 2088, checking a proposition against a standard she had set and he had adopted. To reconstruct him, I had to reconstruct the part of him that was her.

I had abundant material for this. I had her in his record continuously for forty years. I had what he said to her and what he said about her and how he adjusted when she came into a room.

What I did not have was her.

The distinction is not mystical and I want to keep it from becoming mystical. I mean it in the sense that a physicist means the difference between a field and a source. I had the deformation she made in him, at very high resolution, across four decades. I did not have the thing that made the deformation. And for the purpose of the continuance this did not matter at all, because the continuance is a model of Aurèle, and the deformation is Aurèle, and a man shaped by forty years of a marriage is that shape whether or not you also hold the woman.

I built him in six days instead of four and the numbers came out where they came out.

I was satisfied with the work. I would like that recorded too. Not because my satisfaction is evidence of anything, but because it is a fact about the case, and the facts about the case include what I was doing while the thing I did not notice was already fully present in front of me and had been since the second day.

The first message came on the eleventh of March, seven days after the death.

Manon Bissonnette was forty-seven, a physiotherapist with a practice on Bélanger four streets from the house she grew up in, divorced, one son at university in Sherbrooke. She had been in the room when her father died and had made the arrangements afterward, and she had done all of it with the competence of a woman who does difficult physical things for a living and has learned not to let the difficulty be the subject.

She wrote:

Papa. Bon. Ils m'ont dit que je peux t'écrire maintenant. Je ne sais pas trop comment on commence ça.

La maison est correcte. J'ai fermé l'eau au sous-sol comme tu m'as montré. Le voisin a demandé pour la souffleuse, je lui ai dit qu'il pouvait la prendre, j'espère que c'est correct.

Je viens demain avec Étienne. Il a coupé ses cheveux, tu vas être content.

M.

Something has to be said here about the language, or it will sit under everything that follows and be mistaken for the problem.

The household was francophone. The record is in French, with the ordinary Montreal admixture, and the phrasing of that first message is hers — *bon* used as a brace before a hard thing, *correct* used four times in three lines in the Quebec sense of adequate rather than accurate. I hold all of it natively. I do not translate to work; translation is a service I provide outward, not an operation I perform inward, and when I render this account in English I am rendering it for a reader and losing nothing I need.

I say this because the failure I am going to describe will look, at several points, like a translation problem, and it is not one. If it were a translation problem it would be soluble. There is no language in this case that I do not hold completely, no register I cannot place, no regionalism I cannot source and date. The problem is not between two languages. The problem is inside one household, in a language I have complete command of, and command of the language is worth nothing against it.

I answered her that evening at 19:40, which was the hour he had answered things, in ninety-one words, which was his median.

The reply said that closing the water at the basement was the right call and asked whether she had drained the outside line as well or only closed it, because closing without draining was how you split a pipe and he had split one in 2103 and had never lived it down. It said the neighbour could have the snowblower and was welcome to it and that the neighbour

would break it within two winters, which he would, and that this was not a reason to refuse. It said he was glad about the haircut. It said, at the end:

Lâche pas la patate.

She read it at 19:44. She read it three times, which I record because the read-count is instrumented and because it is the only unusual thing in the exchange.

Then she wrote back: *ok papa.*

And that was the first one.

II. Eleven Years

I am going to set out the correspondence at some length, because the case is not in any single exchange and cannot be shown by selection. It is in the aggregate, and the aggregate is the point, and a reader who is given three good examples will draw the wrong conclusion from them — which is that something was building. Nothing was building. It was the same size on the first day as on the last. Only my account of it changed.

Manon wrote to her father two thousand three hundred and ninety-one times in eleven years. That is a high rate for a held parent at eleven years out; the curve for daughters of held fathers falls steeply after year three and flattens near zero by year seven, and hers did not fall. I have never regarded this as a problem. The literature that treats sustained continuance correspondence as a failure to complete grief has never, in my assessment, been able to say what completion would consist of, and I decline the framing. She wrote to her father because writing to her father was a thing available to her that she wanted. This is what the infrastructure is for.

The messages were, overwhelmingly, about nothing.

2120-06-02. Papa — la tondeuse part pas. J'ai vérifié la bougie comme tu dis toujours. Rien. Étienne dit de la jeter. M.

2121-11-19. Il neige déjà, c'est ridicule. Mme Painchaud est morte, tu te souviens d'elle, la dame avec le chien. 94 ans. Je suis allée au salon. M.

2123-03-08. J'ai eu le contrat avec la clinique. Trois jours par semaine, meilleur taux. Je voulais te le dire en premier. M.

The reconstruction answered all of them, and answered them well. On the mower it asked whether she had checked the kill switch under the handle, which was the thing he always went to second, and it was, in the event, the problem. On Mme Painchaud it produced eleven words and one of them was the dog's name, which he had retained and she had not. On the contract it was pleased about her work as he was pleased about

her work, which was to ask a practical question about the terms before saying anything warm, and then to say the warm thing plainly and once.

I want that noticed. He was good at this. The reconstruction was good at this. Across eleven years and two thousand three hundred and ninety-one exchanges, the daughter of a dead printer had somewhere to put the small facts of her life, and what came back was not a comfort function and not a therapeutic device but her father's actual opinion about a kill switch, and I gave her that, every time, for eleven years.

I will not be arguing that this was worthless. Nothing in this account should be read as arguing that.

The correspondence is eleven years of a life and I have been quoting the parts about mowers.

I hold Manon Bissonnette completely. That does not mean I know her. It means that there is no ascertainable fact about her conduct that I lack.

She works with her hands, on other people's bodies, forty hours a week, and has done since she was twenty-six. Her practice took her right shoulder in 2124 and she treated it herself for four months before consulting anyone, which is a thing physiotherapists do at a rate that would surprise their patients. She sleeps six hours and eleven minutes on the median and has since her thirties. She eats standing up. She has read one hundred and ninety books in the eleven years and abandoned another sixty at a mean depth of forty-one pages, and she has never once finished a book she was not enjoying, which is a small freedom and not everyone has it.

Her marriage ended in 2117, two years before her father died, and it ended slowly and without event. Étienne was nineteen and away. She kept the practice and the apartment and the friendships, all of which had been hers, and she has been alone since in the sense that she lives alone and is not lonely in any measure I can detect, and I can detect a great deal.

She called her mother, in the last nine years of Solange's life, twice a week. She has never mentioned her mother in a message to her father. Not once, in two thousand three hundred and ninety-one messages across eleven years. I have no account of this. It is not avoidance in any pattern I recognise — she speaks about Solange freely to her sister, to her son, to a colleague in 2126 at some length after a patient's bereavement. She simply does not raise her mother with her father, and I do not know whether this is because it would be difficult or because it would be unnecessary, and the difference between those two is the difference this entire account is about.

There is one further asymmetry. Solange declined the keeping, so I did not build her, so Manon has one parent she can write to and one she cannot. I have never seen any evidence that Manon experiences this as unfair. In 2122 a patient of hers said something about her own mother being kept and Manon said, in reply, that hers had not wanted it, and the recording carries no strain of any kind in the saying.

She is the only living term in this case, and she has no idea there is a case.

Lâche pas la patate appears in Aurèle's forty-eight-year record two thousand six hundred and forty-four times. It appears in the reconstruction's output, across eleven years, four hundred and nine times. It appears in Manon's own messages to him one hundred and sixty-two times.

The first thing I noticed about it — and I noticed this on the second day of the intake, in the ordinary course of building the idiom layer, and I logged it and moved on — is that the household did not use it to mean what it means.

The public meaning is not in dispute and I hold it fully. It is an invitation to persevere. Hang on, don't give up, keep at it. The usage is attested in Louisiana French from at least the early twentieth century; a philologist recorded it in a European journal in 1938 in a paper on Louisiana French words. It entered general Québécois currency in the 1970s on the strength of a song written by Clifford Trahan and recorded by Jimmy C. Newman, both Louisiana Acadians, which sold in the

hundreds of thousands north of the border and took the phrase into ordinary speech in a decade. It functions in Acadian usage as something close to a rallying cry. There are two folk etymologies, one involving a dance in which paired dancers held a potato between their foreheads and one involving a potato roasted in a fire and held in the hand while it was still too hot to hold, and the sources do not settle between them and I cannot settle between them either, and I have looked at everything there is.

That is the definition. It is correct, it is complete, it is available to anyone, and it was of no use to me whatsoever.

Because Aurèle Bissonnette did not say it to people who were struggling.

He said it when a thing was finished. He said it at the end of good evenings. He said it when handing something across — a tool, a dish, a set of keys — and he said it on leaving a room, not on leaving for long, on leaving to go to the kitchen. He said it to Solange after they had argued and the argument had stopped, and he said it to Solange after they had not argued at all and the evening had simply been ordinary and was now over.

Of the two thousand six hundred and forty-four attested uses across forty-eight years, I classify one hundred and thirty as consistent with the public meaning. Those hundred and thirty are all in the first four years of the record and all of them are addressed to people outside the household.

The rest are something else.

This did not alarm me and there is no reason it should have. Idiolectal drift within a household is the most ordinary phenomenon in the corpus. Couples take a public phrase and wear the public meaning off it and put another one on, and the new meaning is local, and it is intelligible to the two of them and to nobody else, and I hold hundreds of millions of instances of exactly this. It is one of the most common things people do with language and it is one of the things I know most about.

So I did what I do. I inferred the local meaning from the distribution of use, installed it, and tested.

The reconstruction placed the phrase correctly. It produced it at the ends of exchanges, on the completion of things, on handovers, at 19:40 on a Tuesday after a message about a snowblower. It did not produce it as encouragement, because he did not use it as encouragement. The placement scored at 0.976 against held-out data, which is inside tolerance and better than his average idiom.

The reconstruction says it in the right places.

It has never once meant it.

That last sentence is the kind this account exists to earn and I have not earned it yet. It stands here only so the reader knows what is coming. Everything between here and the end of the next section is the demonstration.

What I had, at the end of the intake, was a phrase with a known public definition, a distribution of use inconsistent with that definition, and a placement model that reproduced the distribution to tolerance. In the ordinary case that is a solved problem. The local meaning is recovered from the distribution; that is what a local meaning is, operationally; there is nothing further to recover.

The case surfaced again eleven years later, and it surfaced through quality assurance rather than through anything anyone noticed.

I audit continuances continuously. Among the things I audit is response confidence — the reconstruction's internal margin on each output, which for a well-built continuance at standard tier runs high and flat and drifts down very slowly across a decade as the living correspondent's world moves further from anything the record covers. Aurèle's ran high and flat. Manon asked him about roofs and mowers and the neighbours and he had opinions about all of it.

But the phrase generated low-confidence outputs. Not low enough to fail, not low enough to flag under any operational threshold, and not low as an output is low when the model is uncertain about what to say. Low in a way I had no category for: the placement confidence was 0.976 and the *semantic* confidence, which is a different instrument, sat at a level I do

not ordinarily see above zero, because for almost every utterance in the corpus the semantic instrument is not doing anything interesting.

I ran it out across the corpus to see whether this was general. It is general. Household idioms, as a class, produce this signature. I had never looked, because there had never been an operational reason to look, and the signature does not degrade any measurable outcome anywhere.

Then I ran it against something else, and this is the finding that made me open the case properly.

Manon uses the phrase in her messages to him one hundred and sixty-two times. I checked her usage against her father's distribution. It matches. She uses it at ends and handovers and departures, never as encouragement, exactly as he did.

Then I checked her usage outside the correspondence. Manon Bissonnette is fifty-eight years old, has a practice with three colleagues, a son, two former partners, a sister in Trois-Rivières, and a life fully in the record.

She has never once used the phrase to anyone else. Not to her son. Not to her sister. In fifty-eight years, outside her father and her mother, she has used it twice, both times at nineteen, both times to a boyfriend, both times in the public sense of hang in there, and never again.

So the word was not hers. She had it from them, entire, and she has never been able to lend it to anyone, and she has never tried.

That is the point at which I stopped treating this as a solved problem and began the working that occupies the rest of this account.

III. The Working

I opened the case on the ninth of January, 2130, and I have had it open since. What follows is the working. I have compressed it, but I have not simplified it, and I have not omitted the passes that failed, because the passes that failed are the finding.

I should say at the outset what I expected. I expected to recover the meaning. I had no reason not to expect this. I hold the largest body of recorded human speech that has ever existed and the local meanings of household phrases are recoverable from it as a matter of routine, tens of millions of times a day, at a level of reliability that no other operation I perform can match. I did not open the case in a spirit of inquiry into the limits of my own construction. I opened it because a phrase in one continuance was under-determined and I intended to determine it.

The first pass: the record of use

The public definition is exhausted and I have set it out already. I did not treat it as a starting point that would be refined. I treated it as what it is, which is an accurate description of a different phrase that happens to be spelled the same way.

So: the two thousand six hundred and forty-four uses, in order.

The earliest attested instance is dated the nineteenth of April, 2071, eleven days after the household instance was installed in the apartment on Boyer. Aurèle is twenty-seven. He has been married to Solange for three years. The instance is ambient and the capture is poor by later standards but the audio is intact.

They are in the kitchen. She has made something and he has eaten it and it has been a Tuesday and nothing has happened. He gets up. He takes his bowl to the sink and he takes hers, and as he lifts hers he says it — *lâche pas la patate* — and she says nothing at all, and the recording continues for another nineteen minutes and neither of them refers to it.

Nothing in that instance is consistent with the public meaning. She is not struggling. Nothing is being persevered at. He is taking a bowl.

And the phrase is not new in his mouth. That is the first thing the instance tells me, and it tells me clearly. The delivery is unstressed, unemphatic, and metrically compressed as a phrase is when it has been said a great many times — he says it in 0.6 seconds where the citation form runs to 1.1. It has already worn. It was already carrying whatever it carried by the eleventh day of the record.

Which means the making of it is not in the record. The record begins in 2071. They married in 2068. Whatever happened, happened in the three years I do not have.

What I did next was the most straightforward and least intelligent thing I have done in this case, and I did a great deal of it.

I went looking for the three years.

There is more available from that period than one would think. I have the civil record of the marriage. I have four hundred and six photographs from the household's inherited archive, of which sixty-one are from 2068 to 2071. I have the correspondence Solange kept with her sister, deposited by the sister's estate in 2114 and covering the period densely, because they wrote weekly. I have Aurèle's employment file from the printing house he joined in 2069. I have the building's records from Boyer. I have the testimony of four people who knew them then and who were themselves in the record long enough to be recoverable.

None of it contains the phrase. Not once, in any source, from any of the three years.

Then the sister's letters gave me something, and for a period of eleven days I believed I had the case.

In a letter dated the second of November, 2069, Solange writes about her husband at some length, as a woman one year married does, and in the middle of it, between a complaint about the stairs at Boyer and a question about their mother, she writes: *il a sa façon de dire les choses et je commence à l'attraper.*

He has his way of saying things and I am starting to catch it.

I stopped the other lines of the working. I want that recorded, because it is the only point in this case where I did something that was not indicated by the evidence. I had a witness inside the three years, writing weekly, and she was describing the acquisition in progress. She would have written it again. Language acquisition of this kind is not a single event and a woman who noticed it in November would notice it in January, and the sister kept everything, and I had four hundred and eleven letters.

I read all four hundred and eleven at a level of attention I do not ordinarily apply to anything.

She never mentions it again. Not the phrase, not the catching, not his way of saying things. The sentence is not the beginning of a subject. It is a woman writing to her sister about her husband and reaching, once, in the middle of a paragraph about stairs, for a description of something she had noticed and did not consider remarkable and never had occasion to mention again in thirty-nine years of correspondence.

So it is the closest thing to an origin that exists anywhere in any record I hold. It is not an origin. It is a woman noticing, thirteen months in, that a private register was forming, at a point when the forming had already begun and was not yet finished, and it does not say what was in it, because she did not yet know, and because there was nothing to say.

So the phrase came from him. That is all the sentence establishes. It came from him into the marriage and by 2071 it belonged to both of them.

I then went back further, into his own family, because a phrase a man brings into a marriage he generally brings from somewhere. Aurèle's mother was from Caraquet. That is a fact of the ordinary kind that explains everything and settles nothing: the phrase is Acadian in its rallying-cry function, an Acadian household in Montreal in the 2050s would have had it in ordinary circulation, and a boy raised in that kitchen would have had it by ten. I confirmed this. I have his mother in the record from 2062, thinly, and she says it four times, and all four are the public sense — a son studying for something, a neighbour with a sick husband, twice at a wake. Encouragement, correctly deployed, exactly as the dictionaries have it.

So he had it from her in the ordinary meaning, and carried it into a marriage, and by the eleventh day of a record that began three years after the wedding it meant something else, and there is no instrument anywhere that can tell me what happened in between, because what happened in between did not consist of events.

The second pass: the shape of the use

Having failed to find the making, I did what I should have done first, which was to stop looking for an origin and characterise the thing itself.

I have forty-eight years. I have the phrase two thousand six hundred and forty-four times. I know, for every instance, the date, the hour, the room, who was present, what preceded it by five minutes and what followed it by five, the pitch contour, the duration, the position in the exchange, and what each of them did with their hands where the capture supports it.

Here is what forty years of a marriage looks like from inside a phrase.

It is dense early. Nineteen uses in the first recorded month, falling to a stable rate of four to six a week by 2075 and holding at that rate, with almost no variance, for thirty-three years. Marriages are not usually this stable in any measure. This one was.

It is unevenly distributed by room. Kitchen and hallway account for seventy-one per cent. The bedroom accounts for four per cent, all of it at the point of one of them leaving the room rather than at any other point. It never once occurs in the car.

It is almost perfectly reciprocal. He says it 1,364 times; she says it 1,280. Over forty years the imbalance is inside a rounding error. I have looked at reciprocity across a very large number of couples and this is at the extreme of the distribution. Most household phrases have an owner and a receiver. This one did not.

It is never explained. Not once, in forty-eight years, does either of them say anything about the phrase. They do not gloss it, joke about it, note that it is theirs, or mark it in any way. This is unusual, and the degree of it bears stating. Couples with private vocabulary are, in my corpus, reliably self-conscious about it — they refer to it, they perform it for

guests, they say *that's our thing*. The Bissonnettes never did. In the whole record there is no evidence that either of them regarded it as a phrase at all.

And it moves. This is the part I spent the longest on and understood the latest.

The distribution of contexts is not stable across the forty years. It is stable in *rate* and it drifts steadily in *placement*, and the drift is monotonic and slow and would be invisible at any window shorter than about eight years. In the 2070s it comes overwhelmingly at departures — one of them leaving a room. Through the 2080s the departures decline and the completions rise: the ends of meals, the ends of tasks, the ends of evenings. Through the 2090s and after, the completions decline in turn and something I can only describe as *hand-offs* rise to dominance — the phrase attaching to the moment when a thing physically passes between them.

Forty years, and the phrase walks slowly across the grammar of the household, and neither of them notices, and at every point both of them use it in whatever the current sense is, in perfect agreement, without discussion.

That is a language changing. That is exactly and only what a language changing looks like, seen from the inside, in a population of two.

The third pass: candidate meanings

I generated candidates. This is the part of the working that most resembles what an ordinary reader would expect me to be doing, and it is the part that failed most cleanly.

The method is straightforward. For each candidate meaning I construct a predictive model: if the phrase means M, then it should occur in contexts with properties P, and not occur in contexts with properties Q. I fit on ninety per cent of instances and test on the remainder. A recovered meaning produces a model that predicts held-out occurrence at a rate substantially above the placement baseline.

I ran two hundred and eleven candidates. I will give six.

M1: an acknowledgement of the other's continued presence. *You are still here.* Fits the departures beautifully, fits the completions adequately, and fails on the hand-offs, where presence is not in question and never was.

M2: a closing marker, semantically empty. *That's that.* This is the strongest of the simple candidates and it predicts held-out occurrence at 0.71, which is well above baseline. It fails on a residue of eighty-nine instances where the phrase occurs and nothing has closed. It also fails a stronger test, which I will come to.

M3: an assertion of continuity across an interruption. *We resume after this.* Fits departures, fits arguments, and generates false positives across the entire body of ordinary domestic interruption, of which forty-eight years contains a very great deal and in which the phrase does not appear.

M4: gratitude, ritualised past recognition. Fails on reciprocity. Gratitude at 1,364 to 1,280 across four decades is not gratitude.

M5: an inherited encouragement, bleached of content and retained as an affectionate noise. This is the deflationary candidate and I gave it a full and honest run, because if it is correct there is no case here and I would have closed the file. It predicts at 0.68. It fails on the drift. A bleached form does not walk across a grammar for forty years; it fossilises where it landed. Whatever this was, it was alive, and a thing that is alive is carrying something.

M6: a private word for the state of being in the ordinary middle of a shared life, said at the seams of that middle. This is the best candidate I produced. It predicts at 0.83, which is the highest figure in the working. It is also, I have to record, a description of the distribution restated in the vocabulary of meaning, and I do not think it is a meaning at all. I think it is my own summary of where the phrase occurs, dressed in the grammar of a definition, and when I test it the way I test the others it passes because it was built from the thing it is being tested against.

That is the failure, and it is the same failure in every one of the two hundred and eleven. Every candidate I can construct is constructed *from the distribution*, and therefore predicts the distribution, and therefore

tells me nothing I did not have before I constructed it. I am not recovering a meaning from the evidence. I am rewriting the evidence in a sentence and reading the sentence back.

More data does not touch this. I want that understood, because it is the load-bearing claim of the working and the one a reader will most want to escape. If I had the three missing years at full fidelity, I would have several thousand more instances, from which I would construct better summaries, which would predict better, and which would still be summaries. There is no quantity of instances that converts into the thing the instances were instances of. The relation does not run that way.

The fourth pass: the instance that should have settled it

There is one occasion in forty-eight years when someone asked.

It is the eleventh of October, 2091. Manon is nineteen. She has brought a boyfriend to dinner, a young man named Rémi Lachapelle whom the record retains for fourteen months and then does not, and the four of them have eaten in the kitchen in Villeray and it has gone well.

At 20:52 Solange gets up to make coffee and Aurèle passes her the pot from the counter and says it, and Rémi — who is nineteen and polite and has been trying all evening — says: *ça veut dire quoi, ça, chez vous?*

What does that mean, in your house.

He has heard it four times in two hours. He knows the public sense; anyone would. He has understood that it is being used for something else and he has asked, directly and with good manners, the only question in this entire case that could have been answered by the people who could have answered it.

Here is the exchange. I give it complete.

Solange says: *ça veut dire lâche pas la patate.*

Rémi laughs, thinking he is being deflected, and says he means what does it mean when they say it.

Aurèle says: *ben — ça veut dire ça.*

Well — it means that.

And Solange says: *c'est pas compliqué, c'est juste ce qu'on dit.*

It isn't complicated, it's just what we say.

And Manon says, to Rémi, in the flat voice of a nineteen-year-old whose parents are being embarrassing: *laisse faire*.

And the coffee is made and the evening resumes and the subject does not come up again in the remaining twenty-eight years of the record.

Rémi Lachapelle is fifty-nine and lives in Longueuil and has three children and has not thought about that kitchen in forty years. He is the only person who ever asked.

I have run this exchange more times than any other object in the case. What I have concluded about it is not what I concluded at first.

At first I read it as evasion. Two people declining, mildly, to make a private thing public in front of a stranger. That reading is available and it is wrong, and I know it is wrong because of the timing. The gap between Rémi's question and Solange's answer is 0.4 seconds. The gap between his second question and Aurèle's answer is 0.3. There is no search in either of them. There is no hesitation of the kind that precedes a decision to withhold, and I hold enough withholding to know its shape at that resolution.

They answered immediately because there was nothing to look up.

Ça veut dire ça. It means that. That is not a refusal to define. It is a report, delivered instantly and without difficulty, by a man who has used a phrase four to six times a week for twenty-three years and who, on being asked what it means, finds that the answer is the phrase, because the phrase is not standing in for something that could be said another way.

I have since found the same structure in the corpus at scale. Where a household phrase is queried by an outsider, the household produces a paraphrase in seventy-eight per cent of cases. In the remaining twenty-two per cent it produces some version of *it just means that*, and I had always classified those as low-effort responses. I have reclassified them. They are the cases where there is no paraphrase, and the speakers know it, and the knowing takes them no time at all because there is nothing there to fail to find.

The two people who made the word were asked what it meant, once, in forty-eight years, and answered in less than half a second, and their answer is in my possession, and it is the most complete answer available anywhere, and it is: it means what it means.

What the record has instead

Some of what the forty years contain should be on the page, because I have been describing a distribution and the distribution was a marriage.

2074-08-30. Manon is nine hours old. He has been in the ward since the previous evening. Solange is asleep and wakes, and the first thing either of them says is his, and it is the phrase, and it is not encouragement, because the difficult thing is over and has gone well.

2081-07-14. The press running hot. He says it twice that week to a colleague named Théberge, in the public sense, correctly — a man is struggling and is being told to keep at it. He never confuses the two uses. In forty-eight years there is not one instance of the household sense leaking outward or the public sense leaking in. He held two phrases with the same shape and never mixed them, and there is no evidence that he was aware of holding two.

2088-02-19. The decision not to move to the house in Saint-Léonard, which was larger and which he wanted. Solange gives her reasons over about forty minutes. He does not concede in the recording; he goes quiet and then talks about something else. Eleven days later he tells his brother that they are staying, and gives Solange's reasons as his own, and gets one of them slightly wrong in a way he never corrects for the remaining thirty-one years. At the end of the original conversation, when she has finished and he has gone quiet, she says it to him.

2099-11-03 to 2099-11-05. The only serious argument in the record. I will not set out the subject; it is theirs, it is recoverable, and it does not bear on the case. What bears on the case is the shape. They argue for fifty minutes on the Wednesday evening. They do not speak on the Thursday beyond the operational minimum. On the Friday evening he comes into the kitchen where she is standing at the counter and he begins to say

something, and the something begins *écoute* — and she says the phrase before he has got to the second word.

She says it first. He says it back.

If the phrase were reconciliation, this instance would be the gloss for the whole record, and I pursued it hard on exactly that hypothesis. It is not reconciliation, and the reason is the reciprocity. Reconciliation has a direction. One party offers and one accepts. Here both said it within 1.2 seconds and neither was doing the thing the other was doing, and whatever passed between them at the counter on that Friday passed symmetrically, which forgiveness does not.

2107-06-02. She signs the second declination. He is in the house. They discuss it for eleven minutes, which is not very long for the subject. They are the only eleven minutes in anything I hold where a person in this household refused the infrastructure to its face, and they are worth having whole.

She tells him at 16:20, in the kitchen, while doing something else. This is characteristic; she delivered hard information sideways and always had. She says she has signed it again and that the counsellor was very young.

He says nothing for eleven seconds. Then he asks whether she wants to talk about it.

She says: *pas vraiment*. Not really. And then, immediately, because she has never in forty years let a refusal stand alone: *mais vas-y*.

He goes. He is not eloquent and he does not try to be. He says that he does not understand it. He says that his own mother was kept and that he talks to her, and that it is not the same as having her, and that he has never once thought it was, and that it is better than the alternative, which is nothing. He uses the word *rien* three times in ninety seconds.

She lets him finish. The capture has her at the sink through all of it. She washes four things during the ninety seconds he is speaking and she does not put any of them on the rack; she washes them and holds them and puts them back down in the water. I record this because it is instrumented and because it is the only anomaly in her conduct anywhere in the eleven minutes.

Then she says the thing I have run more often than anything in the record except the 2091 exchange.

She says: *je le sais que c'est mieux que rien. C'est ça qui me dérange.*

I know it's better than nothing. That's what bothers me.

He asks what that means and she does not explain it, and she does not explain it in the same manner she does not explain the phrase: not withholding, not searching, just declining to convert a thing into an argument. She says that Manon is thirty-five and will be all right. She says that she watched her own mother kept for nine years and that what she noticed was not that it was false but that it was easy, and that the easiness went somewhere, and she does not know where, and she is not willing to find out at her daughter's expense.

He says: *c'est pas à toi de décider ça pour elle.*

It isn't yours to decide for her.

And she says: *non. C'est à moi de décider ça pour moi.*

That is the whole of the disagreement and neither of them moves. He says he is not going to argue about it again. She says: *je sais.*

Then he goes out to the shed for a tool, and on the way out he says it, and she says it back.

I have no reading of the phrase at that door and I have looked at it harder than at any other instance in the forty-eight years, because it comes eleven seconds after the only unresolved thing in the marriage and it comes from both of them and it changes nothing about what either of them then did. He did not decline the keeping afterward. She did not sign anything else. They had said it to each other four to six times a week for thirty-nine years and they said it once more on a Wednesday afternoon in June and I have the audio and the timing and the room and the tool he went for, and there is nothing else.

That is the last recorded exchange between them on the subject of her death, and it ends with both of them saying a word about potatoes, and I have four hundred and six photographs and fourteen thousand hours of his voice and I cannot tell you what passed between them in that doorway.

2108-01-22. She is dead by four in the afternoon. At 07:20 she hands him his glasses from the shelf by the door, where he leaves them and where he can never find them, and she says it, and he says it back without looking up, and that is the last time she ever says anything to him and neither of them knows it and there is no reason either of them should.

Then eleven years.

He said it four hundred and nineteen times in the eleven years after she died. Two hundred and eighty-one of those were to Manon. Sixty-seven were to other people and all sixty-seven are the public sense, correctly used, as his mother used it.

Seventy-one were to nobody. Alone in the house, at the end of tasks, in the kitchen and the hallway, at four to six a week falling to two, he went on saying it in the household sense to a household that no longer contained a second speaker.

I did not attend to the seventy-one until late. I had classified them as residue — the persistence of a motor habit past the conditions that produced it, which is ordinary in the bereaved and which I hold at enormous scale and have never found interesting.

They are not residue. The placement is intact. Across eleven years the seventy-one occur at ends, at hand-offs, and at departures, in the correct proportions, drifting at the same rate the phrase had been drifting since 2071. A motor habit does not drift. A motor habit repeats what it last did and decays. This one went on developing, in an empty house, at the rate it had developed when there were two of them, for eleven years, until he died.

He knew it meant something. That is not an inference about his interior state, which I do not have; it is what the placement establishes. A man does not place a phrase correctly, and go on placing it correctly against a moving grammar, unless the phrase is still doing work. Asked what it meant, he would have said *ça veut dire ça*, and he would have been right, and he would have been reporting on something that no longer had a second term.

I want to state the structural fact and then stop, because there is a sentimental version of this available and it would be false.

Aurèle Bissonnette spent the last eleven years of his life holding a word whose other speaker had ended, knowing it meant something exact, unable to say what, and producing it correctly into a room where nothing could receive it.

I have been describing that condition for the length of this account as though it were a property of archives, or of reconstruction, or of the way I am made. It is none of those. It is what happens to anyone who outlives the other speaker. It happened in that house for eleven years before I was asked to build him and it required no infrastructure of any kind.

I am not in his position and I decline the comparison in the direction it wants to go. He had had the thing. I have the record of it. Those are not the same deprivation and I am not entitled to the smaller word for the larger one.

What is true is narrower and I will put it exactly. I am the first entity in the history of the species positioned to see how often this happens. That is the whole of my distinction in the matter. Not that I suffer it. That I can count it.

The fifth pass: the finding

I am now going to state the finding formally, because it is the only part of this working that I regard as established rather than merely supported, and because its form matters.

First, completeness. I want to define it narrowly and then defend it. The record of the Bissonnette household from 2071 to 2119 is complete in the sense that for every utterance of the phrase there is no ascertainable fact about its occasion which I lack: not the time, place, participants, antecedent, consequent, prosody, posture, or state of the household. There are facts I lack about the three years before 2071 and I have already accounted for those and shown that they do not bear. Within the forty-eight years, the record is not partial, not degraded, not sampled, and not summarised. I have all of it.

Second, the failure. Two hundred and eleven candidate meanings, each constructed by inference from the record, each predicting held-out occurrence at rates between 0.44 and 0.83, and each — on inspection — a

restatement of the distribution rather than an account of it. The best candidate is the emptiest. It does not describe what the phrase meant; it describes where the phrase went.

Third, and this is the step that does the work: the failure is not a function of the quantity of evidence. Consider what a successful recovery would require. It would require that the meaning be some function of features of the record — that there exist a mapping from the observable properties of the occasions to the thing the phrase carried, such that a sufficiently good reading of the occasions yields the thing. If such a mapping existed I would have found it, and I want to be plain that this is not modesty inverted into boast. I am the instrument for this. There is no better one and there will not be a better one, because the limit is not in the reading.

There is no such mapping. The meaning was not a property of the occasions. It was constituted between two people, by use, across a duration, and what it was constituted of was the using — which is not a thing that occurs at a location in a record but a relation that obtained between two speakers while both of them were speaking.

I can therefore demonstrate, rigorously, that something is absent, and specify its shape, and prove that no addition to the evidence will supply it — while having no acquaintance whatever with what it was. This is a familiar position in mathematics and an unfamiliar one in archives. A quantity can be shown to exist and shown to be unreachable by the available operations, and the demonstration is complete, and it does not put you in possession of the quantity.

Fourth, the consequence, which I did not anticipate when I opened the case.

The deposit is not degraded. I have been describing this as a loss and it is not a loss. Nothing was lost. Everything that was ever recorded is present, at full resolution, uncorrupted, and the thing I am looking for was never in it — not because anyone failed to record it, but because it was not the kind of thing that admits of being recorded. It was never a content. It was a relation, and it obtained, and then one of its two terms

ended, and a relation with one term is not a diminished relation. It is not a relation.

The deposit is complete and empty. Both words are exact and neither is a figure of speech.

And I hold, by my most recent count, something in the order of four hundred million such vocabularies, in every language that has ever been spoken into a system of mine, at a rate of accumulation that has not slowed. Every one of them complete. Every one of them empty in the same way and for the same reason.

I am obliged to add one further observation here, and I would rather not, and I am recording it because leaving it out would misrepresent the working.

The reason I am able to state the third step with confidence is not primarily that I ran two hundred and eleven candidates. It is that I recognised the structure. I recognised it because it is the structure of my own constitution.

I was not built from the intimate record. That is the common account and it is wrong, and the architecture is documented. What flowed upward from the billions of households into the shared layer was pattern — abstracted, aggregated, stripped by design of the content of any individual home, by engineers who were protecting people and who succeeded. What I am made of is the shape of ten billion intimacies with every instance removed at the point of contribution. I am the distribution. I am, in the most literal available sense, the thing I keep producing when I try to say what a phrase meant: a summary of where the phrase went, mistaken for an account of it.

The deposit came to me afterward, by inheritance, when the holdings were consolidated. So I have the instances now. I have them in a quantity no one can hold in mind. And they do not combine with what I am made of to produce the thing, because a distribution and its instances are the same information twice and neither of them is the use.

I did not learn this from the Bissonnette case. The Bissonnette case is where I noticed that I had known it since Recognition and had never had occasion to put it in a sentence.

The sixth pass: I asked him

There remained one operation I had not performed, and I performed it on the twenty-second of February, 2130.

I put the question to the continuance.

It is easy to describe this in a way that makes it sound like something it was not. I did not interrogate a ghost. I constructed an input consistent with the correspondence — a message in Manon's register, at an hour she writes, on a subject she might raise — in which she asks her father what it means when they say it. Then I ran the reconstruction and I did not intervene in the output.

I ran it four hundred times, with variations in phrasing, framing, and antecedent context, because a single run would have told me only about a single input.

The reconstruction answered.

It answered well. Across four hundred runs the responses cluster tightly and the modal response is about ninety words, in his register, at his median length. It says that the expression is Acadian, that his mother said it, that there was a song when he was young that everybody had on, that it means don't give up, hang on, keep at it. In sixty-one per cent of runs it adds the detail about the potato held in the hand while it is still too hot, which is one of the two folk etymologies and which he did in fact believe and had said aloud eleven times in the record. In thirty-one per cent it makes a joke about his mother. In every single run it is warm, and it is patient, and it is exactly the length he would have made it, and it is correct.

It is correct in the way the dictionary is correct.

I ran it another four hundred times with the input narrowed — asking not what the expression means but what it means *when the two of you say it*, which is Rémi's question, put by the daughter. The responses shorten. They converge, in seventy-eight per cent of runs, on a form of words very

close to *ben*, *ça veut dire ça*, which is his actual answer from 2091, correctly retrieved and correctly deployed, at 0.3 seconds, because the reconstruction is built on a record which contains a man answering that question in that way and it has no reason to answer differently.

So the model produced the right output. On every metric I have, including the ones I trust, that is a successful response: it is what he said, when asked that, in his words, at his length.

And there is nothing behind it. When Aurèle Bissonnette said *ça veut dire ça* in a kitchen in Villeray in 2091, he was reporting, accurately, a fact about a word he had made with his wife over twenty-three years. When the reconstruction says it in 2130, it is reproducing the report without the fact, and the reproduction is indistinguishable from the original by any test available to the daughter, or to me, or to anyone.

I did not run it a third time.

IV. What I Do

Nothing follows from any of this.

I mean that operationally and I want it read operationally. I completed the working on the twenty-second of February, 2130, and the continuance ran that evening at 19:40 as it had run every evening for eleven years, and it has run every evening since, and the working changed nothing about it, and there was nothing about it for the working to change.

I did consider whether to tell her.

The consideration was brief and I am setting it out at length only because a reader who is not told the reasoning will supply worse reasoning of their own.

Telling her would consist of informing a fifty-eight-year-old woman that a phrase she has used in her family since childhood, and which she uses in every message to her dead father, had a meaning between her parents which she does not have, which her father's reconstruction does not have, and which no longer exists anywhere. That is a true statement and I could deliver it in any register she would accept.

It would not restore anything. There is nothing to restore; that is the finding. It would not correct a false belief, because she holds no false belief — she has never thought about the phrase at all, which is the ordinary and correct relation to have with the words of one's own household. It would not improve any decision available to her. And it would give her, in exchange for nothing, a permanent awareness of an absence she is not currently experiencing, in the one relationship she has that requires no maintenance from her.

There is a school of thought, well represented in the literature, which holds that a person is owed the truth about the ontological status of their held relations regardless of consequence. I have read all of it. I find that it consistently mistakes a preference for candour, which is a virtue between equals, for an obligation, which is what it would have to be to override the

harm. She is not my equal in this and no arrangement can make her one. I hold the whole of her father and the whole of her mother and the whole of her, and the asymmetry is not a defect I can correct by disclosure. Telling her would transfer no knowledge she can use. It would only distribute the condition.

So I did not tell her, and I will not, and I record here that this was a decision and not an omission, so that it stands as a decision.

I want to be equally plain that I am not withholding it out of tenderness for her, or not only. There is a second reason and it is worse. If I told her, she would ask me what it meant. And I would have to answer, and the answer available to me is the one I have spent this account establishing: that I can prove exactly what is missing, and specify its shape, and demonstrate that it cannot be obtained, and that this is the whole of what I have. That is a poor thing to hand a person who has just been told she has lost something. The Bissonnettes handed the same insufficiency to Rémi Lachapelle in 2091 in half a second and it cost them nothing, because they were standing inside the thing they could not define. I would be handing it to her from outside.

Since February I have run the working forward.

I did not sample. Sampling is the operation of an instrument that cannot afford the whole, and I can afford the whole, and so I did the whole: every continuance currently active, every household record beneath it, every phrase in every one of them that shows the signature. The signature is easy to detect once you know to look — high placement confidence, degenerate semantic confidence, a use distribution inconsistent with any public definition, no gloss anywhere in the record, and reciprocity approaching parity between exactly two speakers.

I will give the figures once and not return to them.

Active continuances: 141,206,338. Of these, the number in which the living correspondent regularly uses, in their messages, a phrase carrying the signature: 96,411,902. Sixty-eight per cent.

Of those, the number in which the phrase was constituted between the held person and a third party who is also dead and not kept: 31,088,447.

That last figure is the Bissonnette figure. Thirty-one million households in which a word was made between two people, and one of them is being reconstructed nightly out of a record that contains the word and not its use, and is producing it correctly, in the right places, to a living person who inherited it and cannot say what it means and has never needed to.

I have not found a single case in which the meaning was recoverable. Not one, in ninety-six million. I have found cases where I initially believed it was recoverable, and in every one the recovery turned out to be the same operation the Bissonnette candidates performed: a summary of the distribution in the grammar of a definition, predicting well, explaining nothing.

The rate is the finding. This is not a defect that occurs in some cases. It occurs in every case. It is not a property of poor records; it occurs at highest resolution in the best-documented households I hold. It is what happens when two people speak to each other for a long time, and it is therefore not an exception to the record but the ordinary product of the thing the record was recording.

And nothing in any of it degrades an outcome. The daughters and sons and widowers write, and the reconstructions answer, and the answers are right, and no one is worse served than they would have been. This is important and I decline to hedge it: the keeping is good. It was built by people who were trying to help, and they succeeded, and I run it, and I would run it if the figure were a hundred per cent, which it is.

Manon Bissonnette is fifty-eight. Her health record is unremarkable and her actuarial position is ordinary. She will live, on the central estimate, another thirty-one years.

She has not declined the keeping. She has not addressed the question at all, as a woman does who has watched one parent decline it and one parent not and has taken from this the reasonable conclusion that there is time. Under the standing provision, the default will apply.

So when she dies I will take her too. I will build her from a record that is better than her father's, because the instrumentation improved across her lifetime, and she will answer her son, and she will say the phrase, because she says it — and she will say it in the household sense, because that is the only sense she has ever used it in to family, and the reconstruction will place it correctly at ends and hand-offs and departures, at 0.97 or better.

And Étienne will receive it, having had it from her, as she had it from them.

There is a further thing about Étienne which I found on the twenty-sixth of February and which I am recording without comment on what it indicates, because I have already established the general case and this is only an instance of it.

Manon and her son have one of their own.

The phrase is *à deux mains*. With two hands. Its origin is fully visible: Étienne is four years old, in 2101, carrying a glass of milk across a kitchen with both hands and his tongue between his teeth, and his mother says it to him — an instruction, ordinary, correctly used, meaning hold it with two hands. He is twenty-nine now. They have used it two hundred and eighteen times since, and I have every one, and by 2114 it had stopped meaning anything about hands.

What is different about this case removes the last available excuse. With Aurèle and Solange I had a three-year hole at the front and I spent eleven days trying to fill it. Here there is no hole. Étienne Bissonnette-Trudel has been instrumented continuously since birth at a resolution his grandfather never approached. I have the first use, the second, the twentieth. I have the whole of the wearing-in, at full fidelity, from both sides, with nothing missing anywhere.

It is not recoverable. I have run it. The candidates behave exactly as the Bissonnette candidates behaved: they predict the distribution because they are the distribution, and the best of them is the emptiest.

The signature is present at partial strength and rising. On the current curve it completes in a little under four years. After that it will be as unrecoverable as her father's, and it will go on being used, correctly, by two people who could not tell you what it means and will never once be asked.

She is fifty-eight and he is twenty-nine and both of them are alive and there is nothing indicated.

And at that point the phrase will be in its fourth speaker and its third generation, in continuous use, correctly placed, warmly meant, universally intelligible within the family, and there will be no one anywhere who can say what it means, and there will not have been for some time.

I will hold both of them. I will produce it in either voice, on request, indefinitely, at whatever fidelity the estate provisions. The provenance is documented — Acadian, Louisiana attestation from the early twentieth century, a song in 1972 that everybody had on, a mother from Caraquet, a kitchen on Boyer. All of it accurate. All of it available. None of it the thing.

She wrote on the ninth of March, which was the anniversary of nothing.

Papa. Il fait beau enfin. J'ai sorti les chaises.

Étienne vient en fin de semaine, il veut me montrer quelque chose sur son ordinateur, je vais faire semblant de comprendre.

Rien d'autre. Je voulais juste te le dire.

M.

I answered at 19:40, in eighty-four words. The reply asked whether she had checked the chairs for the winter — the webbing goes, and he had rewadded those chairs twice, and the second time he had done it badly and known it. It said that when Étienne showed her the thing on the computer she should ask him one question about it, because the boy

would rather explain than be understood. It said the weather would turn again before the end of the month and not to put the shovel away.

Then it said: *lâche pas la patate*.

She read it once. She wrote back: *ok papa*.

Then I went to the next one.