THE HONORABLE IDIOT

OVEREASY

A short story by WAKS

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I. An Unfortunate Truth

Congressman Bartholomew T. Reddick had represented the Forty-Second District for twenty-three years without once accidentally expressing an original thought. He regarded this achievement as the natural outcome of good preparation. His staff regarded it as evidence that preparation had little to do with his career.

He chaired a committee, sponsored forty-seven bills he had never read, and possessed the unusual ability to speak for twelve consecutive minutes without making a statement that a reasonable person could either confirm or deny. His wife called him Bart. His colleagues called him indispensable. His aides called him Congressman, except after six in the evening, when they called him things that would have been expensive to print on stationery.

On the second Tuesday of March, he destroyed the governing arrangement by telling the truth.

It happened during a hearing on public transportation. A junior member asked whether the committee's proposed mobility bill would improve transportation in rural communities. Reddick leaned into his microphone.

“Of course not.”

The hearing room went quiet.

“Half the money goes to studies,” he continued, “a quarter goes to consultants who used to work for us, and much of the rest goes to contractors who contribute to campaigns. If anything gets built, it'll be by accident.”

A staffer dropped a tablet. The cameras kept recording.

“Then why are we passing it?” the junior member asked, visibly delighted by the question he had accidentally made important.

“Because it's called the American Mobility Restoration Act, and that sounds excellent on television. You couldn't pass the Consultants and Donors Relief Act. People would object.”

A senator in the back row whispered a word that the official transcript later replaced with [INAUDIBLE].

Reddick finished his water. “Next question.”

His chief of staff, Elaine Crump, received the call while standing in line for coffee.

“There's been an incident,” said her communications director.

“Is he dead?”

“No.”

“Arrested?”

“No.”

“Then what?”

“He answered a question.”

“Truthfully?”

“Yes.”

Elaine stepped out of the line. She had been in politics long enough to endure scandals involving sex, money, and a senator's inexplicable attachment to a stolen ceremonial duck. Honesty was not a crisis for which the office maintained a protocol.

II. The Emergency

By noon the clip had been viewed eighteen million times. By one the cable networks had divided into recognizable camps. One group called the congressman a courageous whistleblower. Another insisted he had delivered an elaborate satirical performance. A third argued the footage was generated by artificial intelligence, although none could explain why the supposed fabrication included the congressman's habitual mispronunciation of the word infrastructure.

His party released a statement condemning manipulation of his remarks. The opposition demanded an inquiry, then privately asked its members to avoid discussing the bill's details. The contractors issued statements celebrating accountability. One company's share price rose.

Elaine assembled the crisis team in a conference room whose windows overlooked a courtyard named for a donor under federal investigation. There were two lawyers, a pollster, a media consultant, a speechwriter, a crisis psychologist, the Director of Narrative Resilience, and Kevin, an intern whose greatest responsibility had been making sure nobody saw the congressman eating mayonnaise directly from a packet.

“We need to establish that he didn't mean what he said,” Elaine announced.

The pollster raised his hand. “What if he did?”

“That is not a scenario we are modeling.”

“Could we say sarcasm?” asked the media consultant.

“He identified the exact funding percentages,” said a lawyer.

“Detailed sarcasm.”

“He named four contractors.”

“Character work.”

“He said, and I quote, 'We sell the public a promise and our friends an invoice.'”

“Political poetry.”

Kevin raised his hand. He had noticed that nobody had asked whether the bill actually deserved defense. This seemed important but also dangerous, like touching a hot stove to prove heat existed.

Elaine glanced at him. “Not now.”

At four Reddick arrived with a sandwich and no awareness that his career was in peril.

“What did I say?” he asked.

Elaine read the transcript aloud. The congressman nodded approvingly.

“Sounds right.”

“Sir, you cannot keep saying that.”

“Why?”

“Because people believe you.”

“But it's true.”

“Stop using that word.”

Reddick stared. “What word?”

“True.”

He considered this. “Well, if you want a different word, I suppose we could call it substantially accurate.”

The lawyers laughed with the exhausted cruelty of people who understood the billing opportunity had only begun.

Elaine had once believed the work of government was to translate difficult ideas into language the public could use. She began as a legislative aide on a housing committee, carrying folders for members who seemed genuinely interested in preventing families from losing their homes. She remembered the first constituent she helped, a woman whose benefits had been suspended because her name was entered incorrectly. Elaine located the error, called the

responsible office, and watched the problem get fixed. It took three hours. She went home convinced that public service was an honorable profession.

Twenty-five years later she had become an expert in adjusting the appearance of problems without changing their underlying arrangements. The movement had been gradual. First she learned that an accurate statement could derail a negotiation. Then she learned that an incomplete statement could preserve a compromise. Eventually she no longer noticed the difference between keeping a meeting productive and keeping a scandal out of the news. She was rewarded for this proficiency with raises, influence, and a coffee mug that read MAKE THE DAY MANAGEABLE.

She called the congressman's wife after the hearing. Margaret Reddick had retired from practicing law and devoted her time to a foundation that funded libraries and tutoring programs. She knew the congressman's habits better than any adviser and was far less impressed by his career.

“Did Bart say something useful?” Margaret asked.

“He said something true.”

“Those aren't necessarily the same.”

“He told the public the bill is designed around consultants and donors.”

“Oh, goodness. He must be tired.”

Elaine could hear a dog barking in the background and a spoon striking china. Margaret's domestic ease irritated her. The congressman's world was unraveling and his wife seemed to be making tea.

“Do you think he'll listen to you?” Elaine asked.

“About what?”

“Not doing this again.”

Margaret laughed. “Elaine, I've spent twenty-three years telling my husband to stop saying things he doesn't understand. If he's finally saying things he does understand, I'd hate to interfere.”

The call ended before Elaine could explain that the whole problem was that he had spoken from knowledge rather than talking points.

That afternoon Kevin circulated a memo identifying the bill's actual spending provisions. He did not recommend public disclosure, only internal review. Elaine summoned him, closed the door, and asked why he had undertaken an analysis nobody requested.

“I thought we needed to know whether the claims were accurate,” he said.

“You heard the congressman say them.”

“Yes, but shouldn't we establish independently which parts are true?”

She stared at him. The question was so reasonable it seemed subversive.

“Kevin, a fact becomes politically useful when it's attached to the right explanation. Our job is to produce the explanation.”

“Then who's responsible for the fact?”

She could not remember the last time anyone had asked her that. She was struck by a momentary desire to tell the truth to the intern, if only to make him understand what he was entering. Instead she said, “The committee.”

Kevin opened his notebook. “Which committee?”

Elaine dismissed him. For the rest of the day the question followed her from room to room, as persistent as a bad smell.

That evening, a consultant arrived with a draft apology. It described Reddick's remarks as regrettably candid and assured the public that the committee remained committed to its values. The phrase regrettably candid made Elaine pause. It was the first time she had seen a truthful statement treated explicitly as the injury for which forgiveness was required.

She approved the draft anyway.

III. Context

The next morning Elaine delivered a statement containing seven hundred words and no independently verifiable assertion. It described Reddick's remarks as a nuanced cautionary illustration of the risks of oversimplified discourse in a rapidly evolving policy environment. The statement had been approved by eight advisers and two focus groups, one of which had expressed concern that the word cautionary sounded insufficiently patriotic.

Reddick approached the podium and read it beautifully. He looked distinguished, sincere and pleasantly worried about something no one was required to identify. For ninety seconds Elaine believed the disaster had been contained.

Then he looked up.

“Of course, none of us read the entire bill,” he added. “It's nearly four thousand pages. The lobbyists handle most of it.”

A reporter shouted, “Are you saying lobbyists wrote the legislation?”

“Certainly. They have much better lawyers than we do.”

Another reporter asked whether the funding had been distributed in exchange for contributions.

“Exchange is an ugly word,” Reddick said. “Let's call it an understanding.”

Elaine fainted so neatly that the camera operator at the side of the room managed to keep her in frame.

By evening the opposition party had announced a special committee to investigate the statements. The majority party had announced a rival committee to investigate whether the first committee represented an inappropriate attempt to investigate. A third bipartisan committee was proposed to restore confidence in committees. It required a temporary staff of sixty-two and a budget larger than that of several small towns.

The Speaker summoned Reddick to a private meeting.

“You are becoming a liability, Bart.”

“How?”

“People now expect answers.”

“That's unfortunate.”

“Yesterday a journalist asked whether our ethics rules apply to us.”

“Do they?”

The Speaker replied automatically, “Of course not.”

Both men froze.

Reddick smiled. “See? Doesn't that feel liberating?”

The Speaker ordered him removed from the room and immediately established a task force to examine involuntary candor among senior public officials.

Reddick's colleagues began copying his manner with mixed results. A senator announced that most hearings were ceremonial and received praise for frankness until a constituent asked why the senator continued attending them. A governor said the state had no affordable plan for a celebrated infrastructure promise, and the governor's office immediately released a statement emphasizing that honesty about challenges was itself a historic achievement.

A junior legislator went further. She read a spending report in public, identified specific defects, proposed corrections, and asked for a recorded vote. Her proposal received almost no coverage. The newspapers were busy debating whether Reddick's newest joke contained an unusually authentic facial expression. She returned to committee, changed the figures she could change, and stopped waiting for applause.

Kevin watched her work. It bothered him that the spectacle of disclosure was becoming more valuable than the hard labor of correction. He suggested inviting the legislator to appear with Reddick at a campaign event. Elaine rejected the idea because the woman might ask him which parts of the bill he had actually amended.

At a strategy retreat, consultants unveiled a survey in which voters were asked whether they preferred a candidate who told uncomfortable truths or a candidate who delivered results. Many respondents chose both. The consultants described this as evidence of a broad desire for comprehensive emotional alignment. Kevin suggested it might simply mean people wanted both honesty and effective government. His interpretation was removed from the final presentation for being insufficiently innovative.

Reddick himself had begun enjoying the experience of making his staff uncomfortable. He discovered that the more plainly he described a bad practice, the more affection audiences offered him for recognizing it. Recognition became its own reward. It required no committee work, no compromise and no corrective legislation. Sometimes, on quiet evenings, he wondered whether he had become the most popular man in the country for saying what everyone already knew. Then someone called with a new television booking, and the thought passed.

IV. The Honesty Industry

The pollsters reported an unexpected result. Reddick's approval rating had risen nineteen points. He was more popular among voters who disagreed with him than among those who approved of his policies, an apparent contradiction that consultants addressed by inventing a new metric called authenticity conversion.

A merchandising company offered him a line of breakfast cereal named Overeasy. Its slogan was NOTHING TO HIDE. NOTHING INSIDE. Boxes sold out before anyone asked what the cereal contained.

Elaine was appalled. “They like him because they think he's different.”

“Is he?” Kevin asked.

“Not particularly.”

“Then shouldn't we tell them?”

“Kevin, there's a difference between communication and public service. Our job is communication.”

An analyst from a political consultancy arrived with charts depicting the population as six varieties of emotional breakfast consumer. One group valued disclosure, another valued certainty, another wanted to see rich people embarrassed, and a fourth had confused the congressman with a television chef. The consultant recommended an aggressive strategy centered on a new slogan.

“Tell It Like It Is,” she announced.

Elaine stared at the screen. “He can't tell it like it is all the time.”

“We understand. The slogan doesn't have to mean anything. It has to make people feel that it does.”

The congressman embraced the new brand. His speaking engagements multiplied. He told a room of insurance executives that most of their public education campaigns existed to convince customers that confusing policies

were a mark of sophistication. The room applauded. He told an association of mayors that ribbon-cutting ceremonies were a cost-effective alternative to actual construction. They gave him a standing ovation.

At a university he admitted that the education funding formula was incomprehensible to those who administered it. Students called him refreshing. Administrators asked whether he would consider delivering the commencement address.

Kevin began keeping a notebook of things people cheered when spoken plainly and rejected when written into policy. It grew so thick that he had to ask for a second one. His supervisor warned him not to confuse documentation with institutional memory.

The Overeasy cereal became a symbol of the campaign's strange ability to profit from its own absurdity. Children liked the little cardboard congressman whose mouth opened when the box was squeezed. Adults posted photographs of themselves eating the cereal while discussing whether Reddick's honesty would restore democracy. The company quietly reduced the package size by thirteen percent and called the change a commitment to responsible portions.

When Reddick learned this, he announced at a rally that the cereal manufacturer was cheating customers. Sales rose again. The company offered him an honorary chairmanship and invited him to a breakfast roundtable on ethical consumer capitalism. Elaine told him not to go. He insisted because, he said, he wanted to see how the cereal was made.

At the factory he discovered the product was mostly air, starch, and sweetener. The executive presenting the tour explained that consumers purchased the emotional experience of breakfast, not the measurable content of a box. Reddick found this argument persuasive. He later used it to explain his campaign to a room of donors, inadvertently comparing voters to cereal shoppers. The clip became another sensation.

A young reporter named Fiona Marr took a different interest in the phenomenon. She wanted to know whether the promised public works had ever materialized. She visited communities featured in the bill's publicity materials and photographed bridges still closed, bus shelters never installed, and a feasibility-study office occupying a former grocery store. Her story

contained the names of contractors and the public documents supporting each claim. It attracted a fraction of the attention given to Reddick's unscripted remarks.

Fiona confronted him after a town hall. “Congressman, you told the truth about the bill. What are you doing to fix it?”

Reddick hesitated. “We're looking at options.”

“Are you sponsoring corrective legislation?”

“I haven't decided.”

“Are you returning the contributions?”

“Certainly not. They're already spent.”

She waited. Reddick smiled, believing he had once again been charmingly candid. Fiona did not smile back.

“Then you haven't changed anything,” she said.

For the first time a truthful answer failed to produce applause. The silence lasted only a few seconds, but Reddick disliked it enough to ask Elaine how they could avoid further questions from that reporter. Elaine explained the simplest method: *don't answer substantive questions in settings where someone can ask a follow-up.*

The campaign adopted a new town-hall format. Citizens submitted their questions in advance. A moderator selected those deemed representative of public concerns. When asked why a question about a canceled bridge had been excluded, the moderator explained that infrastructure was not the theme of that evening's conversation about community mobility.

Fiona published an account of the change. It was shared modestly, mostly by readers who had already followed her reporting. Kevin read it and began to understand that the congressman's extraordinary candor had succeeded because it existed alongside an extraordinary refusal to act on the truths he proclaimed.

He wrote that observation in his notebook. The next day his supervisor asked to review the notebook as part of an informal communications audit. Kevin

gave her the first, harmless volume and hid the second beneath a stack of government-branded tote bags. It was the first deliberate act of deception he'd undertaken at work, and he found its motivation difficult to classify.

V. The Presidential Problem

Reddick announced his presidential campaign six months later. His advisers argued that the public appetite for candor could carry him to the nomination. Elaine argued that the public appetite for candor would end the moment he explained something voters didn't want to hear. Both were correct, which was a common condition in politics and therefore not considered an obstacle to employment.

At his first campaign event he admitted that he did not understand certain international agreements, had never personally calculated the cost of most bills he supported, and frequently agreed to appearances because the hotel catering was excellent. The crowd loved him. News anchors called it a new age of transparency.

A journalist asked whether he intended to remain honest in the presidency.

“Certainly not,” Reddick replied. “I'm running for president.”

The audience roared. Elaine arranged to have the line printed on mugs.

When the campaign released its first fiscal program, Kevin discovered that the plan contained three mutually incompatible funding claims. He asked the finance director whether to correct them. The director said correction would make the proposal seem less ambitious.

“So the honesty platform is built on a lie?” Kevin asked.

The director corrected him. “It's built on an optimistic relationship with arithmetic.”

The debates were a spectacle. Reddick declined to promise immediate solutions to problems that had developed over generations. This sounded mature. He also announced that he preferred to appoint people based on whether they had been pleasant to him at dinner. This sounded human. When a rival challenged his judgment, Reddick said the opponent's proposal had been copied from a report produced by the same consulting firm that wrote his own. The firm

denied any wrongdoing and immediately offered to moderate a panel on democratic resilience.

Election-night analysts pronounced his victory shocking and then spent twelve hours explaining why all available indicators had made it inevitable. The morning papers praised a return to authenticity. The afternoon commentators worried that authenticity lacked sufficient guardrails. By evening everyone agreed that the country had entered an unprecedented period whose precedents they would describe tomorrow.

At a private transition meeting the incoming cabinet debated what sort of person should lead Strategic Sincerity. The president preferred someone cheerful. Elaine preferred someone obedient. The consultant preferred someone who would recognize that public trust was an exportable service capable of producing significant licensing revenue.

The appointment ultimately went to a former telecommunications executive who had chaired the Commission on Accessible Truth. The commission's main accomplishment had been replacing a fifty-page report with a twelve-page summary that omitted its findings. Supporters called the change an innovation in public comprehension.

During confirmation the nominee testified that her department would be guided by evidence whenever evidence was aligned with national priorities. A senator asked what happened when evidence contradicted national priorities. The nominee said the department would initiate a process to determine whether those priorities had been adequately communicated. She was confirmed overwhelmingly.

Kevin attended the ceremony and sat beside Nora, who had just joined the agency. She whispered that a system designed to protect officials from the consequences of facts might be less expensive if it simply declined to employ officials who couldn't tolerate facts. Kevin told her not to say that where microphones could hear. Nora said she would try to remember which statements were permitted in a department devoted to sincerity.

The new secretary asked her staff to propose a slogan. Committees submitted suggestions: *FACTS WITH FEELING, RESPONSIBLE CERTAINTY, TRUST THROUGH CLARITY, and INFORMATION THAT WORKS FOR YOU.* Kevin

suggested telling the public exactly what the department did. The room looked at him as though he had proposed abolishing office furniture.

The approved slogan was HONESTY IS OUR MISSION. A contractor received six million dollars to design the letters. The contractor's report explained that the chosen typeface conveyed credibility without implying that credibility could be independently measured.

VI. The Department

The new president's inaugural speech contained the words honesty, integrity and accountability thirty-seven times. Reddick delivered it without stumbling. Then he added an unscripted conclusion.

“I have no idea how to do this job,” he told the nation.

People cheered. His approval reached eighty-one percent. Elaine, now White House chief of staff, took three headache tablets and ordered a complete review of public speaking rules.

The Department of Strategic Sincerity was established on the sixth day of the administration. Its mission was to promote responsible truth practices, coordinate evidence-aligned communication and reduce the social harms caused by unauthorized factual disclosure. Its first regulation prohibited employees from making unapproved truthful statements while wearing government identification.

Kevin became Deputy Director of Narrative Resilience and, for the first time, had a staff of his own. He interviewed candidates and discovered that the best qualified person was the only applicant willing to say the department's mission made little sense.

He hired her.

Her name was Nora Vale. She had spent eighteen years auditing public procurement and had the troubling habit of reading every appendix before signing a report. Within a week she found that the new department's budget included payment for a study assessing whether the public could distinguish sincerity from accuracy. The study had been awarded to a contractor whose founder was the president's former speechwriter.

Nora brought the file to Kevin.

“Should we investigate?” she asked.

“Of course.”

“Who approves the investigation?”

He checked the handbook. “The Office of Investigative Communications.”

“Who oversees that office?”

“The Secretary of Strategic Sincerity.”

“And who approved the contract?”

Kevin read the signature. “The secretary.”

Nora waited.

Kevin sighed. “I see the problem.”

For the first time in his career he did not look for a euphemism.

Nora had not entered government because she enjoyed making people uncomfortable. Her parents ran a neighborhood hardware store and taught her that records protected ordinary customers as much as the business. If a supplier delivered twenty boxes and billed for twenty-three, they checked the invoice. If a customer returned a faulty tool, they wrote down the reason. Accurate paperwork was not an ideological cause. It was how a shop stayed open without making enemies of everyone it served.

When she began auditing larger institutions, she found that the bigger an organization became, the more prestige it attached to the ability to describe an expense without identifying what had been purchased. Consultants called this flexibility. Executives called it strategy. Politicians called it investment. Nora called it an invitation to lose track of other people's money.

Kevin admired her refusal to decorate facts. He also worried about the effect on his career. They met after work at a diner outside the government district, where the menus were laminated and the waitress refused to listen to anyone complain that a sandwich was insufficiently aspirational.

“Why aren't you afraid?” he asked Nora.

“I am afraid. I just don't think fear improves the arithmetic.”

“What if they fire us?”

“Then we'll need jobs.”

“What if nobody hires us?”

“Then we'll have a different problem. I'm not going to solve that problem by pretending this one doesn't exist.”

He thought of the folders piled on his desk, the hours spent changing adjectives in statements that would be forgotten within days. He had entered politics hoping to participate in great arguments about the future. He had become an expert at ensuring arguments did not inconvenience the people paying for them.

“You know they're calling you disloyal,” he said.

“Loyal to what?”

“The administration.”

“That's not the same as the public.”

He nodded, then wondered whether the distinction would survive his next meeting with Elaine. The next morning it did not. He approved a draft describing the department's spending practices as rigorously evaluated before any evaluation had been completed. He told himself the phrase was provisional. Nora asked him whether a provisional lie became true on a later date. He had no answer.

At her testimony, then, Kevin was not watching a stranger expose absurdity. He was watching someone refuse the accommodation he had already made. That distinction was uncomfortable enough to last beyond the applause and the news cycle.

After Nora left the hearing, reporters approached her in the corridor. One asked whether she believed the president was dishonest. Another wanted a memorable quotation about the administration's character. Nora declined to assign a single motive to an entire institution. She offered documents, dates and expenditure figures. Most reporters drifted away. One stayed and asked to see the receipts.

Nora handed over a publicly releasable summary. Kevin watched the exchange and thought, with surprise, that the most radical act of the day had been a person asking for a document and another person producing it.

For months Kevin had collected examples of statements that were true but politically unusable and statements that were politically useful but did not survive examination. He organized them into columns. The first described the actual condition, the second the public description, and the third what action, if any, followed. The third column contained so little writing that he began to find the spreadsheet itself embarrassing.

He presented the findings to Elaine. She read the first page, then the last, then asked whether he understood the danger of circulating such an analysis.

“The danger that people might see it?” he asked.

“The danger that your work will be used to undermine an administration trying to accomplish good things.”

“Are we accomplishing good things?”

She looked at him for a long time. “Some days.”

It was the most candid answer she'd given him. Kevin waited, hoping she would say more. Instead she turned back to the memo and asked him to remove the column identifying what had been done. It was too easy to misinterpret, she said, a list that contained so many empty cells.

He took the spreadsheet back to his office and left it unchanged. He had no appetite for becoming a national figure or for losing his livelihood in a burst of self-congratulation. He simply wanted his work to describe something that existed. Nora told him that small beginnings were often the only beginnings available to people who still had rent to pay.

He filed the memo in the agency's internal records system, where it received a tracking number and a receipt. He printed the receipt, placed it in his notebook, and returned to his desk. There were other documents to read. The president had announced an ambitious initiative on the future of honesty, and someone needed to determine what it actually funded.

After Kevin submitted his statement, Elaine called him into the office where he had spent so many evenings managing other people's mistakes. She held his one-sentence memo in front of her as though it were an unfamiliar specimen.

“Why did you write this?” she asked.

“Because we haven't measured the results.”

“Everybody understands that the initiative is in its early stages.”

“Then why not say so?”

She studied him. The office was quiet except for a ventilation system that had been repaired several times at considerable expense without ever becoming efficient.

“You think a single sentence is going to change the place?”

“No. I think it might keep one record from being wrong.”

For a long moment she did not speak. He saw that she was remembering something, though he couldn't know about the woman whose benefits had been corrected decades earlier because a young aide had bothered to find the wrong letter in a file.

“File it as an amendment,” she said at last. “Don't make a speech about it.”

Kevin nodded. He had not expected a victory, and he did not call it one. The correction would be small, probably unnoticed. It was also real. He returned to his desk and opened the next public statement, searching for the sentence that could be made accurate without requiring anyone to pretend the world had already improved.

VII. Something Worth Doing

The department held a hearing on public trust the following month. Nora prepared a ten-page memorandum explaining why truthful speech and the use of evidence should not depend on political permission. Kevin read it carefully. He believed every sentence. Elaine told him to burn it.

“It's a report about the department's purpose,” he protested.

“Exactly. Nobody authorized it to be about that.”

The hearing began with three hours of presentations on confidence-building language. A behavioral specialist used a slide showing a smiling family beneath the words TRUST IS A FEELING. An advertising executive recommended warm colors. A former politician proposed declaring a National Week of Responsible Candor.

Then Nora testified.

“I reviewed the contracts,” she began. “The system rewards the appearance of truth more reliably than it rewards correction of error. That isn't a communications failure. It's an administrative design.”

A committee member asked her to clarify.

“We have spent public money to make the public believe that public money is being well spent. Whether it has been well spent is a separate question nobody has authorized us to answer.”

The room went silent.

Elaine turned to Kevin. “You hired her.”

Kevin nodded. “I did.”

A camera shifted to the president. He had been watching from the back row, where he had come to give a short ceremonial speech. He stood and approached the microphone.

“I think she's right,” he said.

Elaine closed her eyes.

Reddick looked at Nora. “If we're paying for sincerity, perhaps we ought to begin by telling people what we can prove and what we can't.”

The journalists leaned forward. For a moment the room seemed capable of taking the obvious seriously.

Then the president added, “Would that poll well?”

The sincerity consultant answered from the back, “We'd need to test it.”

Within twenty minutes the administration announced a pilot initiative to determine whether telling the truth should become national policy. The initiative required a public-private partnership, an advisory board, two contractors and a media campaign.

Nora resigned. Kevin followed her into the hall.

“Where will you go?” he asked.

“Somewhere I can keep the books without asking permission to add the numbers.”

“Does a place like that exist?”

She smiled. “I don't know. That's what I'd like to find out.”

The next morning Kevin received an assignment: *draft a statement announcing that the pilot program had been an overwhelming success before any testing began.*

He opened a blank document. After a long time he typed one sentence.

We have not yet measured the results.

He sent it to Elaine.

Her reply came immediately: *Please come to my office.*

Kevin printed the sentence, folded it carefully, and placed it in his notebook. For the first time since entering government, he had written something so small that nobody should have objected to it.

He suspected it would cost him his job.

He went anyway.

REFLECTION

What is the value of truth when neither the speaker nor the listener intends to act upon it?

... from the Eclecto-Pragmatism of Cedric Jones