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Promises, Promises

When the aliens arrived, they weren't what we'd expected. You never saw a more pop-eyed, friendly lot. At first, when all they did was watch everything with galloping enthusiasm, it was like being overrun by labrador puppies. Later, when they decided we needed help managing things, some people worried. Most of us found the Oolians a welcome change from our usual leaders, so we didn't mind, but once the Incidents began, more people thought we had to get rid of them. However, getting rid of aliens with faster-than-light travel is easier said than done.

In our town, it started when Joe Biddle ran for mayor. You know Joe: owns the biggest car store in town. He's in the Rotary Club, the country club, and the Church League club. So Joe ran for mayor. He could've been selling that big car you've had your eye on, the one with the compass nobody uses in the rearview mirror and little windshield wipers on the headlights. The town, he said, needed a monorail. It would revitalize business and tourism. He was also going to help the homeless, improve our schools, and create a budget surplus. You know how politicians talk.

The voters didn't object. I mean, are you going to stand up and say, "Hey, Joe, I'd rather you didn't improve our schools"? Of course not. The Oolians loved it. You'd think they'd never heard a politician make promises before, they were so enthusiastic.

Joe's opponent never stood a chance. He was kind of serious, didn't look like he'd ever kissed a baby, even his own, and talked about the cadmium in our town dump. Nobody cared, except the fifty people living near the dump, and even in a town like ours, you don't get elected by fifty people.

So Joe was inaugurated as mayor, made sure the letterhead was changed in the city offices, put his photograph in the city buildings, and worked on his golf handicap.

After a year, the kids still didn't know where Mexico was, the homeless still lived downtown, and Joe's brother, of Biddle and Biddle, General Contractors,

had won the bid on the monorail project. Everything was perfectly normal.

The Oolies looked like labrador puppies who'd had their chew toys taken away. Joe had promised all these wonderful things, they pointed out woefully. What happened?

Joe Biddle explained that he'd been working tirelessly, day and night, but these things take time.

"Day *and* night?" asked the smallest of the Oolies. "You were playing golf last Saturday. And the office closes at five on weekdays."

"Seems like a lot of effort," said a medium-sized Oolie, "if it doesn't get you anywhere."

That wasn't entirely fair. That kind of talk had made Joe mayor, but that wasn't what the Oolians meant. However, they were willing to wait and see, so Joe carried on.

Three years later, when Joe's term was over, the city administration was up-to-date on its letterhead, the kids still didn't know where Mexico was, and the Oolians called a meeting.

They sat at the top table looking like labradors who were rather closely related to wolves.

"Did you or did you not make these promises?" the medium-sized Oolian pinned Joe.

"Of course," Joe hastily agreed. "I've had some notable successes. Complaints about the homeless are way down."

"The homeless are still there," said the largest Oolian, who rarely spoke.

"Of course," said Joe, "but they're no longer a problem."

"They still have nowhere to live," said the smallest alien.

"But I gave them all dummy phones," Joe announced triumphantly. "Now, when they talk to themselves, it doesn't bother people."

The Oolians looked puzzled, shook themselves like dogs coming out of water, and moved on to the next phase.

"You have heard of the social contract?" asked the medium Oolian.

Joe nodded.

"You have promised to deliver services, others to pay for them, yes?"

Another nod from Joe.

"You have been paid?"

"Uh, yes." You could see him sweating, thinking he was going to have to give back his nice salary.

"Then you must deliver. Promises must be kept or anarchy results."

At first, it looked like they planned to lecture Joe to death, but city officials come with callouses on their ears, making them immune. However, the Oolians didn't stop at talking. It turns out that breaking the social contract is a serious crime on Oolia.

So there was Joe Biddle, facing an Incident.

They pointed this sort of pencil thing at him, and Joe became a changed man.

Now he has to keep his promises.

Last night I was driving home from the movies and saw him out there, digging holes for monorail pylons, all by himself. The school principal had to ban him, in no uncertain terms, from “helping” in the classrooms. The homeless don’t like his soup. Nobody knows when he sleeps. And someone who has to keep his promises sure can’t sell cars.

You wouldn’t believe how this has changed the tone of elections. The cadmium guy is running again, and this time I think he’s going to win.

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