

## Paulson's Epiphany

by Mindy Friddle

After a violent demonstration in which a group of eco-terrorists surreptitiously dosed the wealthy developer Chadwick Paulson with Empathy-Rx, he outraged investors and appalled his family by calling off the controversial Crystal Falls project. Paulson, unshaven and disheveled, distraught but cogent, posted a Vreel, explaining his epiphany: clearing acres of pristine forest for a gated community, for profit, was a vile act. How could he have considered doing such a thing? He was ashamed. Oh, he had done terrible things to the earth and its people. No more! Now I see, he said, and wept.

The public meltdown was bad enough, but when Mr. Slash-and-Burn began giving away chunks of his fortune, his wife committed him to a private hospital. There he was examined and interviewed, poked and prodded, scanned and x-rayed, the doctors certain they would find a biological explanation for such an abrupt personality change.

(They wouldn't. EMY-Rx, our proprietary formula, was still largely unknown in the medical world in 2032.)

Perhaps, his psychiatrist suggested, he'd suffered a concussion in the demonstration? What exactly had happened that day?

This is what happened: on that beautiful autumn day in Little Rock, North Carolina, environmentalists assembled to protest the felling of trees, the gating off of pristine forest and a waterfall for private development. Across the street, infuriated landowners gathered and seethed, determined to make a buck, and sell to Paulson.

Paulson had attended not to address the opposing side, but to rally his own. He'd spoken to his followers, to remind them of property rights, to dangle profit, to foment outrage. A violent clash resulted. As the police dispersed tear gas, Paulson's security detail had rushed him away. He'd stood for a minute outside his SUV taking in the melee, his meaty hand swiping absently at a pesky dragonfly rasping and buzzing around his head. Only it wasn't a dragonfly. It was a drone designed to look like one, infused with EMY-Rx, and it hovered over Paulson, dousing him with our odourless, colourless formula, a cloying angel breathed in by his soft grey lungs.

Once e-dosed, Empathy bloomed in Paulson's bloodstream and headed for his brain. The neural activation took seventy-two hours to kick in, to construct a kind of filter, catching his deeply ingrained selfishness, stopping it with a neurophysiological mechanism, built gradually like a reef, to activate neural structures, to enable human beings, even depraved, polluted ones such as Chadwick Paulson, to experience full-blown human empathetic capacity and altruist behavior. Paulson, e-dosed, would feel what other human beings feel—especially those he'd previously detested, the vilified "others", cordoned off by calcified hatred.

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Shortly after the hospital discharged him, Chadwick Paulson humiliated his family by moving into a neighbourhood he'd often referred to as a drug-infested shantytown.

"Oh, Wicky," his wife said, dissolving into tears, as she was wont to do lately.

“Yeah. What Mom said. Look around,” his son Emmett said. “You’re living in a shit hole.”

Paulson had dissolved his company. He had no need to go to an office and declined his family’s wishes to meet them in one. By now, they were familiar with his excuses—it made him uncomfortable to visit such lavish places—the sleek, glassed-in views, the silent, swooping elevators, the brisk, brusque commercial world. He asked that his family come to his apartment, please. They could have a perfectly wonderful time here, visiting, sharing a meal—

“It’s not safe here,” his wife said. “I worry about you.” By then, Yvette Paulson had apologized to her husband for demanding he move out and rescinded the order. She’d only meant to wake him up from his slump. But he’d obviously sunk deeper into his pit of despair, though he denied it. He grew a beard and wore sweatpants. His new manner of dressing shocked her. Her husband had always been neat, fashionable in the way of successful men, clad in pressed shorts and crisp plaid button-downs, at his most casual. He’d even insisted she help iron his boxers.

“And since when are you a pet person?” Emmett demanded. “You wouldn’t let me have a dog for, like, my whole childhood.”

“I was wrong about that,” Paulson said, scratching the scarred ear of Moonpie, his rescued pitbull. “Forgive me.”

The short visit had transpired a few days after Paulson moved into his apartment, a month previously. His wife and son hadn’t been back. Until today.

They’d called, demanding a family meeting. He was delighted and said so. Only they would have to come here, of course.

And so they arrived, his wife and son, bringing a deli platter piled high with pink folds of honey-baked ham, his favourite—once. Nowadays, he no longer ate meat, though his wife simply refused to believe it. Not a man who cherished porterhouse steaks and pork loins!

His son brought a case of Comfortably Numb IPA, vodka, and a bag of ice. “Self-explanatory,” Emmett said, setting up a makeshift bar on Paulson’s wobbly table. “Anyone care to join me? Or shall I day drink alone?”

“I’m glad you’re both here,” Paulson said, and hugged them. He found himself smiling at their frowning faces. He adored them and told them so.

Emmett cringed, embarrassed. Paulson had never been an affectionate father...until now. “Dad, I mean...what is *wrong*?”

Yvette, nonplussed, shook her head.

Paulson told them he was sorry to cause them distress.

“Well, then cut the kumbaya schtick,” Yvette said, and fled to Paulson’s cramped, dingy kitchen. Moonpie whimpered and settled herself on the sofa.

Emmett cracked open a beer. “Go talk to her, Dad. Please. I don’t need another parent in the loony bin.”

In the kitchen, his wife stared into his refrigerator.

“What *is* this?” she took out a wax paper-wrapped platter.

“That, I believe, is called *Rajma*.” Red kidney bean curry, courtesy of Snee and Ninod, across the hall. “There’s plantains with black beans and rice in the bowl.” From the Guatemalan family upstairs, after Paulson repaired their ancient garbage disposal. “And chickpea pancakes.” Delivered by the little girls, Asha and Halima, in the next building. “Should we warm it up for lunch?”

*"Leftover takeout?"*

"They're home-cooked meals. I have generous neighbours," Paulson said. His wife squealed as a cockroach scuttled from behind the stove.

"Don't," Paulson said, as she tried to stomp the thing. "No need to kill it." He scooped the insect into a paper cup, its legs making scratching sounds, then opened the window and flung it outside.

Yvette dissolved into tears. "Wicky, how can you live in this filthy place? In such penury?"

Yvette was often dramatic. There was no calming her in the midst of such tantrums, as he'd only recently realized after decades of marriage—

"Stop smiling! You're doing this to punish me, Wicky. Admit it. You *knew*. All the time. About Nate."

"Nate?" The grinning face of their contractor shimmered in Paulson's memory, a shirtless and tanned young man, supervising the addition to their sunroom two summers before.

Paulson held his wife as she sobbed into his chest. After a minute, she pulled away, looked away.

"It only happened three times. That summer you were gone all the time, working on that development by the lake. I admit it, Wicky. I was unfaithful. So, punish me. I deserve it! But must you punish Emmett too? Must you make paupers out of us all because I had a roll in the hay with that dolt Nate? And it wasn't even good. It was awful. I just...I had a moment of weakness, three little moments of weakness. I didn't feel...appreciated."

Paulson thought of his own disloyalty. Many women, many moments of weakness. He weighed the dilemma. To tell his wife, to confess such a thing, might allay her own guilt, only to

be replaced by her fury and hurt. Such hurt. It would crush her. He knew his Yvette, didn't he? To tell her would only bring her more agony.

"I'm sorry, Yvette. You didn't know how much I loved you, I didn't tell you. Or show you. I took you for granted. I wasn't much of a husband."

A beat of silence, as they looked at each other.

"You're not going to drop this act, are you?" she said. "You're going to keep punishing me. How cruel you are, Wicky."

The doorbell buzzed, with all the decibels of a fire station. Yvette jumped.

"They're here," Emmett called from the next room over Moonpie's half-hearted throaty bark.

"I'm not expecting company," Paulson said, puzzled.

"I am," his wife said.

Standing in Paulson's living room, their priest from All Saints, along with their family lawyer, Larry O'Neal, looking sheepish. "Yvette insisted," Larry muttered to Paulson.

They all watched Paulson carefully, bracing themselves, expecting his outrage. Had he really been such an ogre? Yes. The old Paulson despised any sort of talking or planning behind his back, even surprise birthday parties were verboten.

"How nice to see you all," Paulson said. "We have plenty of food—"

"Wicky, they're not here for lunch," Yvette said.

"Ah. Well, have a seat," Paulson said, gesturing to the castoff sage-green velour sofa, the motley tweed recliner, the three wobbly metal chairs.

Paulson sat on the sunken end of the couch, beside Moonpie, who rested her head on his knee. Emmett handed a beer to Father Roger, who eased into the recliner. Larry poured vodka

over ice. The men took deep gulps from their drinks, and this amused Paulson. All this hullabaloo, this spectacle of theirs, fraught with anxiety was endearing...in its own way.

“Chadwick, we’re here because we are concerned about you,” Father Roger said, in his clipped, lispy way. Paulson winced inwardly as he recalled his merciless skewering of the priest. Mocking his weight, his propensity for hissing S’s—savaging a man of the cloth behind his back! Yvette would sigh, but giggle, sometimes. Emmett would shake his head, *that ain’t right, Dad*, and chuckle. But here, today, coming all this way to visit Paulson, Father Roger, portly and perspiring, nervous, the rind of his collar transparent with sweat—

“It’s warm in here,” Paulson said. “Let me turn on some air.” He flipped on the rattling box fan in the corner and sat back down.

“Chadwick,” Father Roger said again. “Perhapsss you and I should set up some counseling appointments together. To address this sssspirtual crisisss of yours. Until then, legal matters might be besssst left to Yvette and Emmett.”

“You’re always welcome here, Father Roger,” Paulson said. “I’d like that. But you shouldn’t worry. Spiritually, physically, mentally, I’ve never been better.”

Perplexed glances exchanged.

“Chadwick,” Father Roger said. “Yvette would like you to come home. Why have you chosen to continue living here?”

“It feels right, Father. It’s peaceful. It comforts me.”

“How do you fill your days here, alone?”

“Oh, I’m not alone. Far from it,” Paulson said with a chuckle. “I’ve got Moonpie here. Word got out among my neighbours that I’m handy, so I’m often called to help. They bring me plates of food,” he patted his stomach. “The most delicious dinners.” How had Paulson allowed

himself to forget the pleasure of working with his hands? Mrs. Solis upstairs had such a rotten windowsill, the glass fell out, so he'd gone to the hardware store, come back with tools and supplies, and built her a new frame and sill. The smell of sawdust had brought tears to his eyes, transported him back to summers working alongside his father, a cabinet maker—

“Don't you misssss your family?” Father Roger asked.

“Yes, of course.” He looked at his wife. “I miss you, Yvette. But I understand if you won't join me here.”

“Wicky, stay here if you must,” his wife said. “But you can't destroy the businesses you spent your life building!”

“Outlet malls are about oppression,” Paulson said, “layers and layers of oppression.”

She rolled her eyes, heaved a sigh. Alas, his wife was not ready to understand that each of those mall buildings was built on Indigenous land once wrongly seized. And in such places, the wages paid to the retail and food workers were criminally low. The carbon emissions from manufacturing and transporting cheap plastic doodads and fatty food polluted the earth and its people.

“Chadwick,” Father Roger said. “Our Lord and saviour Jesus Christ said the poor would always be with uss. You have been a ssssuccessful, wealthy man, a good provider. Perhapss you are grappling with guilt, after your...illness. A glimpse of one's own mortality can be traumatic, an opportunity for sssspiritual guidance.”

“You can't buy your way into heaven,” his wife added. Yvette had insisted they tithe to All Saints Episcopal all these years, she had seen to that, even over the old Paulson's complaints. She had volunteered in the church's soup kitchen. Paulson had once grumbled about her wasting time on ne'er-do-wells. He flinched again, at his own crass cruelty.



“Wick,” Larry said, as he rattled ice in a cup. “Are you comfortable with turning over legal and business decisions to Yvette? And Emmett? That’s what I’m here for. I can start the process, if you so desire.”

“Thank you, Larry. For coming here today. But I don’t think that’s necessary.”

“Emmett is ready to take over the business, Wicky,” Yvette said. “You always wanted him to, and now he’s ready to be at your side, to learn. Tell him, Emmett.”

Paulson looked at his son, his shorn, black hair with a purple streak, the earring thing, big as a poker chip, that looked like it hurt.

“Emmett is a musician,” Paulson said. “An artist—”

“The band has disbanded,” Emmett said. “Newsflash.”

“I’m sorry to hear that, son. Will you start another one?”

“Uhhh. You always said Candles on Skulls was—” Emmett lifted his fingers to air quote—“a disgrace and embarrassment.”

“I said a lot of heartless things. I was a terrible father, and I’m sorry about that.”

“So, you weren’t *terrible*, Dad. Just...you know...sort of scary.”

“Wicky, we need you,” Yvette said. “We need just a pinch of that, that *terrible* part of you, to get us out of this mess. Larry. Larry, tell him.”

The lawyer cleared his throat. “Actually, Wick is within his rights to liquidate his own business.”

“Whose side are you on?” Yvette said, turning around in the creaky chair to stare daggers at Larry.

“Someone wants to change their life, there’s no law against that, Yvette. Legally, my advice is to hire yourself a family law guy. I don’t do divorces. Divvy it up, sell the house, cut and run if that’s what you want. You’ll be comfortable—”

“Comfortable? My whole life is ruined. I’ll have to sell the house. I can’t live in a condo! And Emmett...Emmett can’t be expected to run a business by himself!”

“Emmett is a grown man,” Larry said.

“He’s only twenty-eight.”

“Uh, hello, people who are talking about me like I’m not even here.” Emmett got up, handed Father Roger another beer.

“You have to stop those things you started, all those donations,” Yvette told Paulson. “We’ll be destitute.”

The land trust, she meant. Paulson had turned over to a preservation land trust the miles and miles of forest and meadows he’d planned to clear and build on. Then there were the medical bills he’d paid after he’d left the hospital—not just his, but dozens of patients’ bills, many of whom he now counted as friends, after weeks of group therapy. And the homeless shelter down the block he passed when he walked Moonpie, he’d made a sizable donation, there, shortly after he gifted his BMW to a single mother without transportation, and gave away his closet of tailored suits.

“No,” Paulson said gently, quietly. “No, Yvette, I can’t do that. But you take the rest, take what is left. Do what you think is fair.”

“Do you see?” she told the others. “You can’t reason with him.”

In Paulson’s chest a softness now, a warm expansion like the shimmering, slow-motion glops of lava lamps. He beamed compassion at the four people staring back at him with

confusion, resentment, and primitive greed. He looked beyond his son and his wife, beyond his anxious priest and his drunk lawyer, and glimpsed the bird feeder outside the living room window. Flutters of yellow, three goldfinches. He closed his eyes, inhaled, exhaled, his breathing like the ocean.

“I’m feeling rather drained,” Paulson told them. “I’m...you’ll have to excuse me. I’d like to take Moonpie for a walk. Please stay and eat lunch, enjoy yourselves.”

But they left, all of them, without eating a bite. The deli platter untouched, still wrapped, on the kitchen counter when Paulson and Moonpie returned. Paulson took the platter to the Solis family upstairs, who were elated to have a tray of deli meat, and sent him home with a coconut cake and a soup bone for Moonpie.