

Operation Empathy

MINDY FRIDDLE

October 13, 2032

Manifesto

An abandoned newborn lies on the rocky ground. The baby is naked, the soil beneath him frozen hard. Do you see him? His hands wave—clenched, tiny fists, and, oh, how he cries. He is hungry and so cold. Defenseless. The baby is dying. Will die. Unless...

You are in the distance, close enough to witness this, too far to see the baby up close. You can't tell if he is ill, maimed, or malformed, you don't even know if the baby is male. But say he is. Say he is baby boy, three weeks old, dehydrated, rapidly losing body heat. How he wails, how he suffers! *Do something, help me.* We are wired to respond, it's in our DNA. Most of us. The baby's sobs grow frantic now as his feet, his hands, his ears begin to lose circulation, frost-bitten soon, unless...

He cries, but he is losing strength—

Do you feel it? In your chest? It *hurts*. A surge of desperation rises in you, animates you.

You rush to the baby. This will endanger you, running to the wailing infant. You may have to traverse across a frozen pond, outrun a pack of wolves, or dash through an open field, an easy target for

soldiering snipers above you. Maybe you are so weak and malnourished yourself, this might well be your undoing—

It doesn't matter. You rush to the baby. You are closer, and closer, and you pick him up, his sobs are wet and weak now, plaintive, and you open your own garments—your pelts, or your Northface parka—and you hold the baby to your chest, warm him, and his cries change to whimpers. The baby warms, he calms, he senses he is safe.

You saved him.

Your empathy saved him.

The easiest kind of empathy: Babies. Human babies, animal babies. The innocence. See them in harm's way, and your instincts propel you.

Imagine now this frantic empathy extended to all humans and animals you encounter, all sentient beings on the planet. *What I feel for you is sympathy. Your pain is my pain*, that's nuclear.

Empathy is a superpower.

If you can't feel it yet, you will. Empathy is coming for us, like a contagion, and I mean that in the best way.

My name is Clementine Pye. I'm just the freaking delivery system.

By the time you read this, you'll understand.

I am not a terrorist, but I've learned to think like one.

76 Our first demonstration: Big Rock, in the Appalachian foothills of North Carolina, an urbanized town surrounded by a forest festooned in autumn finery—scarlet, gold, purple. Police erected barriers on the edge of that forest, where Main Street narrowed, blighting the nexus of the town with neon-orange traffic cones. Two opposing groups entrenched on either side of the street, an asphalt river they could not cross. On one side, close to one hundred environmentalists who protested the felling of trees, the gating off of pristine woods and a waterfall for private development, joined by the ubiquitous GreedLighters, to spotlight avarice and inequality. On the other side, dozens of landowners who wanted to make a buck, and sell to the developer, Chadwick Paulson, also in attendance.

The anger simmered. You are destructive and selfish, trying to profit from land that belongs to everyone—the story of one side. You are lazy troublemakers; you think you are entitled to what others have worked hard to earn—the other.

Authorities in Big Rock—like most towns and cities in 2032—prepared these days for any rally, any assembly, to ignite. Cameras and phones captured the derring-do, summoned disruptors, sparked rage, wildfires of violence in minutes. Law enforcement stockpiled riot gear, war machines, tear gas.

I hid in plain sight. Woman in her forties, no makeup, out for a brisk walk, but without the knit skin of fashionable exercise, just jeans, flannel shirt, bucket hat, small backpack, and my only vanity, silver hoop earrings.

We—the e-gang—had stationed ourselves here on this achingly gorgeous autumn morning on a covert mission: to secretly disperse our own formula, to target the developer Chadwick Paulson, to e-dose Mr. Slash-and-Burn himself with Empathy. We would direct EMY-Rx at this man cowering behind plexiglass now in his suit and tie, surrounded by a scrum of his security detail. He had come 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. Paulson could affect the most change, could halt his scorched earth developments, could, perhaps, acknowledge the homeowners and renters he regularly displaced. Paulson, e-dosed, could alleviate suffering.

I watched LaRita, in sunglasses and a black hijab, stand between a silver-haired short woman with a sign, Don't Rape Our Virgin Forest, and two young men in green hoodies—GreedLighters—holding hands, fists pumping in the air. On the corner, Izzie wore a baseball cap, black pants, white blouse, easily taken for a barista who stumbled onto this protest on her way to work at the Daily Grind coffee shop. Izzie, eyes narrowed with concentration, holding coordinates in her head, ready to signal to Hakeem, who watched from the second floor of the parking garage. Hakeem, in a drab beige uniform, shook his head, tsk tsking, like a parking attendant on his break, leaning over to see what all the excitement was about.

And there would be excitement.

Just not the sort of excitement the crowd expected, the out-of-control surge and crescendo of vitriol, the thrill of dangerous victory each side hoped for.

The real excitement would be quietly dramatic.

Or so I hoped.

Still, I knew the risks.

That the e-dose was too weak, for example. Paulson, untouched. No results for all the risk we were taking.

Or that a breeze might blow EMY-Rx, once dispersed, to others; collateral damage of the accidentally e-dosed had to be factored in. No way to tease them out. When you weaponized Empathy, it fell on all.

Or worse.

Patient Zero worse.

That morning, before the demonstration, Hakeem and I had checked on Patient Zero, hoping, as always, for improvement.

Hakeem drove, and the rutted, dirt road had jostled me awake. Isolated, yes, but the cabin in the Smoky Mountains had to look shabby enough to discourage interest, so as not to attract squatters. To repel thieves and horny teens. The cabin had to appear boring but staid. It took me months to find the right place, another lab, really, is what it was turning out to be. A remote lab. Only inside it looked ridiculous, all bonneted ducks and kitchen kitsch. Underneath, the lab and hospital bed, concealed in the dank, brick walls of the place.

78 We'd stepped into the kitchen, wordlessly, because we never knew. We had to assume we were being watched, overheard. If we talked at all *out there*, in the contaminated world, it was small talk, silly empty words that meant nothing.

Big Eddie closed the door behind us. He'd been an orderly at the Veterans' Home—strong and looming, sober and amiable. I snapped him right up last year, added him to our tight, loyal circle. We headed below, to the safe floor.

Big Eddie informed me that PZ hadn't eaten for twenty-four

hours. You might have to... you know, he'd said, and tilted his head to the medical supply cabinet, stashed with IV bags. Force feeding. We'd come close but it hadn't yet come to that. I looked over the legal tablet Big Eddie handed me. Medical records noted by hand.

Clem, he thinks the water is *alive*.

We looked through the mirrored window, observing PZ, sitting on the floor in his subterranean, lovely space. Natural light with three sun tunnels, ferns and orchids, a shower and small lavatory, polished cement floor, nothing wooden. The construction had to be bricks, manmade materials, no wood, nothing that used to be living.


I'm going in.

Big Eddie and Hakeem exchanged a look. You sure? Big Eddie asked. Seems lately he gets worse around you. Don't go at him too hard.

He's got to eat. Let me see what I can figure out.

Hakeem headed outside to station himself out back, in the deer hunters' stand used to observe PZ, on the chance our patient might panic and bolt.

I stepped into PZ's quarters. He sat on a pillow, his thin, veiny legs in front of him, still and silent as a monk. He did not turn as I drew closer. The glass of water on the table beside him full. It was dawn, the tender pink sky filled with birdsong, and I knew PZ would look up, that he might stand and go to them. The birds.

A wren's cheerful good morning, good morning. A woodpecker's rat-a-tat. PZ's face turned to the glass, his head cocked, listening. His window, embedded in the earth, showed a slice of rosy sky above the cross-section of soil. 

Come outside and listen, I whispered. Watch them...out there.

PZ looked at me, distress gathered like storm clouds on his beleaguered face. I opened the door, stepped outside onto the flagstone patio. Trees, ringing the perimeter. A cement bench there, too, but PZ rarely ventured that far.

He stood, took a few steps to the doorway, and my heart thrummed with excitement, because this was progress. I looked up at the deer stand where Hakeem hunkered down. I felt the pressure.

Mindy Friddle

The e-gang had to believe PZ would emerge from his cocoon of torment.

I patted the space beside me on the bench. Come join me. He looked up, watched a red-bellied woodpecker that chuck chucked, scaled a pine. He took a step.

Wincled. Can't. They're under.

The worms are fine, we made this space so nothing would be hurt, I told him. What I always told him. This space is for you. You can walk on it, you won't hurt anything.

The first time PZ stepped out onto the bare earth, he'd screamed—a long, eerie wailing, like a haunted house sound effect. *I'm hurting them*, he kept saying. He was convinced he was stepping on earthworms below, that he was damaging living creatures, beetles, ants, snails.

PZ rubbed raw, no skin for living in the world. His tough hide had dissolved and then nothing. No buffer, no shell. He saw, he felt...everything.

He wouldn't eat or drink anything that had once lived, nothing crossed his lips unless it had been harvested painlessly. We kept free-range chickens so he could see the hens were content, the eggs they left like presents. Occasionally, he'd eat a boiled egg, a few nuts and seeds, the pecans from the trees, sunflower seeds, peanuts—only things dispersed naturally, without plants dying or animals suffering.

But water, that was a new one. Hydrogen and oxygen. Did he believe the molecules were in pain as he ingested them?

This was empathy gone haywire. How would PZ survive it?

The harder the heart, the more powerful the reaction to EMY-
80 Rx, the more likely something could go wrong. Saul before Paul, Damascus-struck. But I insisted we'd learned from the failure of PZ, hadn't we? We'd calibrated the e-dose.

Now, as I watched the demonstrators yelling, the crowd boiling toward unrest, I sensed we were close to the sort of threatening behavior that called for handcuffs and tear gas.

Someone threw eggs at Paulson, he flinched as they splattered on the plexiglass. Then a bottle, arcing above the street, hit a woman

holding a sign. A second bottle, then, splattering, shattering. The roiling began, the police shouted in their megaphones, as more of them spilled from a van a few yards away, in riot gear.

I watched LaRita's mock-alarm, then spotted Hakeem disappearing, heading for the roof of the parking garage, and Izzie, on the far corner, eyes fixed on Paulson, about to bolt.

It was happening. The melee.

The e-gang, ready.

I put on my mask, fashioned from charcoal pellets, tape, rubber bands, plastic bottles and cans. Because a genuine gas mask would draw questions. Homemade, not so much. Not after the last year's world-wide shortage of masks, when DIY masks became common.

Paulson's security men hustled him off to a black SUV with tinted windows, half a block away.

When the pepper gas started, there was a collective scream. LaRita pulled her headscarf over her face, donned her own gas mask, double safe—we'd spent weeks on that fabric, and you could only test so much in laboratory conditions, but it worked, surely it worked.

LaRita followed Paulson, cradling her hidden can of EMY-Rx. A back-up dose, if needed. This was personal for LaRita. She'd watched Paulson's machines ravage five acres of century-old trees, land she'd once played on as a child. LaRita was willing to fall on her sword for Operation Empathy.

Izzie raised a two-fingered peace sign, the signal. Hakeem, from the roof of the parking garage, sent the drone, small as a ballpoint pen, designed to look like a dragonfly, with wings and compound eyes. The drone hovered, zipping above both sides, heading toward Paulson, a few yards away from the SUV.

One of the protestors, a young guy with shoulder-length shaggy hair, wearing an artsy t-shirt with a picture of a squirrel, broke away, followed Paulson, yelling. Hey, coward. We see you running away.

The signs and banners began to drop. The protestors groaned in pain, coughing, wailing.

They paid no heed to a dragonfly that buzzed overhead. A

block away, when his security men opened the door of the SUV, Paulson looked back at the muted crowd, smiled, so pleased with himself. The man in the squirrel shirt drew closer. I hope you burn in hell, dude. A security guard shoved him hard. The small drone, wings rasping, zipped merrily overhead, hovered above Paulson's head. A fine mist, barely discernable. Paulson's meaty hand swiped in the air, shooping it away. His ruddy face damp, but not with sweat, no—

Dowsed and dosed.

Paulson zoomed off in his SUV. The violence had stopped. The screaming had turned to whimpers. The protest disbanded.

I made my way to the parking garage, took off my mask. In an hour, I would meet up with Hakeem, LaRita, and Izzie. We would examine every second from our cameras, from our observations. Everything hinged on Paulson.

Slower reactions for the hard-hearted, but more kick, too...later. Hours or days. There was nothing to do but wait.

Three days after the demonstration, no noticeable changes in Paulson's routine. Office, gym, home, repeat, according to Izzie, who lingered like a shade in driveways and parking lots.

I stayed in the cabin with PZ, while Big Eddie took some R&R. I crammed in a cot downstairs in the lab and slept near the sink, beside the calorimeters, tubes, and reagent bottles. The electronic lights flickered perpetually down there like a city. I used a beaker to brew pour-over, bitter coffee.

82 On the windowsill, the last of the season's tomatoes, wormy and cold-nipped. Storm gusts had knocked them loose, and PZ gathered them, one by one, moving like slo-mo tai chi. He cradled the tomatoes in his apron, as if they were delicate as eggs. He thanked the withered tomato plants for their bounty. He often talked to plants as he tended them, taking days to stake them, wrapping their tender, fuzzy stalks with medical gauze, careful not to bruise the stems and leaves.

I assumed it would temper with time, this flayed raw effect. In one word, *innocence*. PZ now saw innocence, where once he didn't,

or couldn't. He gazed at the sky, holding his hands up to the trees like some ancient saint.

I stepped outside with a cup of tepid broth, the forest quiet but filled with busyness—scurrying and scratching, fluttering.

It would make me happy if you drank this, I told him. No vegetables were harmed in the making of this soup.

He looked at me, his face crumpling, his hand reaching out toward me, then—

Recoiled. People triggered him. PZ, once a brutal man, appeared taunted by his previous acts of cruelty, the awareness eating him like a parasite, devouring its host from within.

I held out the cup. I had a theory, a new way to motivate him.

You must nourish your own body, I said. You have to hydrate, for your kidneys. You're *hurting* them. Your liver and lungs—your organs are working so hard for you, trying to keep you alive.

Perhaps PZ could be persuaded to perceive his own body as an untainted, virtuous system of organs, laboring to keep him alive. His body, its own sacred sentience, like a beloved pet. The blamelessness of his pumping heart!

He took the cup. He sipped. Then he looked at me over the rim of his cup—cried out, as if I'd zapped him with a live wire. Sorry, he whispered. So sorry. But he finished the broth.

One week post-dose, Paulson's family committed him to a private mental hospital. Rumors of "exhaustion."

Hakeem paced like a caged tiger in the lab. Shit is bad, Clem. We can't create burdens on families, on society like this. Not what we signed up for.

EMY-Rx is kicking in hard before it eases, I said with more conviction than I felt.

You better check with some contacts at the hospital. Find out if we have another PZ on our hands.

If Paulson's wrecked, I said, we'll adjust the dose again. We'll fix this. We'll call a meeting here at the cabin, and I'll address the e-gang's questions. And by the way, I added, PZ is improving. He's eating soup and eggs, he takes walks with Big Eddie.

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Not easy to keep up a front of confidence.

There was one person on this earth who always restored my faith in this mission: My brother, Parker. When I video called home that evening, my mother's face, slack and newly old, filled the screen. She sat with Parker on the porch swing.

You look awful, she said. You're not sleeping, are you?

I'm in the middle of a project.

They're working you too hard.

I smiled, played along. My mother knew nothing of my expulsion from the garden of academia, my mission.

Happy Birthday, I told her.

Nothing happy about it. She swiped away tears with a finger.

I sighed.

I just want to *hear* from him, Clem.

My mother still entertained the idea of forgiving the man who nearly killed her children. Our father. On one of his Jack Daniel's, pill-popping benders, he'd piled my brother and me in his pickup, drove onto the highway and into a tractor-trailer. We were ten. Parker barely survived a traumatic brain injury, but the insidious scarring in his brain—lying in wait. His seizures started at twelve.

My father got seven years. My mother wrote him, visited him, funded his commissary account, then welcomed him back home. Parker and I were freshmen in college the night he violated his parole, a botched convenience store robbery after a confrontation that left my mother with a broken heart and a black eye. Twenty years this time. I was relieved. Hell, I was elated. Our father was out of the picture, finally. Oh, but not so fast. He spent last year in a halfway house, my mother comforting him with chicken pies and pound cake, preparing for his homecoming. Which lasted a month. When their first and last argument erupted, he was smarter this time. He punched the walls beside her. He did not hit her, he hit on a waitress at Down Under, the only bar within walking distance of my mother's house. When he left my mother for his paramour, my mother had the nerve to blame herself.

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Do you think, I asked her now, that he would have waited for you, if you'd been the one sent to prison?

It's my *birthday*, and not a peep.

If he arrived with wilted flowers and sorry excuses, would you take him back?

He deserves another chance, she said. What she always said. What she said last time before he smashed every dish in the kitchen, shoved her down the steps, and terrified Parker.

I'm going over to the bridge again, she said. Check the tents. Since that floozie kicked him to the curb, he could be out there with all those men, having a bender.

You have to get on with your life.

Some life.

Jesus, Mom.

Just let me feel sorry for myself today, she said, and passed the phone to Parker. The screen door slammed behind her like a shot.

Mom is lonely, my brother said in his halting way, lingering on each word. She'll feel better in the morning.

I know. It's you I worry about.

A few years ago, Parker took walks, scrambled eggs, filled his sketchbooks. Lately, a good day meant a few hours of alertness in the morning. His seizures have increased, his mobility impaired by frequent falls and dizziness, his fogginess a side effect of the medications, more and more medications. The clinical trial I got him into, the implanted microchip, has failed.

Any new sketches?

He shook his head. Some nights, he could barely hold a pencil. But I feel her, he whispered now. I can see Empathy. She's here, in my mind. 85

My brother created something out of nothing, summoned it out of thin air. A graphic novel: *The story of the superhero Empathy & how she saves the world*. A hero who can *make* humans feel empathy, who opens pitiless eyes to suffering. Empathy travels through time, saving victims, bringing brutal warmongers to their knees. Even the most cruel, depraved humans are not immune to her power. I have a tattered copy of my brother's magnum opus, all five hundred and

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eight illustrated pages, and I read from it nightly, my own sacred text. Empathy is my muse, her deeds a blueprint for my own work. Parker created the vision. I discovered the formula

When are you coming home, Clem?

Soon, I promise.

I yearned to tell Parker everything, and I would. In person. We would sit on the porch swing with the sweet scent of tea olive and the gentle rustling of palmettos like taffeta dresses, the ringing of frogs from the tidal creek. And I'll confess to him my greatest failure. PZ. In service to the mission, a casualty—

Goodnight, Clem.

Love you, brother.

Though exhaustion fell like a curtain on face, he managed a smile so full of gratitude I felt something in me tear apart.

I retracted the claws of my doubts. I suited up in my armor again—ready for tomorrow. To continue Operation Empathy.

October 13, 2032. This date is a milestone, we will celebrate it for years. Our own holiday. *Chadwick Paulson called off the Crystal Falls development.* The e-gang gathered at the cabin drunk on success and champagne and we watched, over and over, the Vreel he'd posted to explain his "epiphany." In the video, he's disheveled, yes, unshaven, no tie, but ardent and cogent. Paulson explains he's donated the Crystal Falls property to a land trust, the miles of forest and meadows on which he'd planned to clear and build on, will be preserved. And the Pineview Square mall project, cancelled, too. Strip malls are about oppression, Paulson says, layers and layers of oppression. He winces, as he apologizes for planning to build on indigenous land once wrongly seized. In such places, he says, the wages paid to the retail and food workers are criminally low. The carbon emissions from manufacturing and transporting cheap plastic doodads and fatty food polluted the earth and its people. I have done terrible things, terrible. But now I see, he says, and weeps.

I awoke from last night's celebration with a headache and my own epiphany.

Operation Empathy

PZ had plateaued. He would not evolve, not here. Paulson was our success, PZ our failure. My failure.

I studied PZ from the window as he watched dozens of butterflies fluttering on thatches of milkweed. Coral orange Monarchs floating in, Great Spangled Fritillaries—their silver sequined wings glittering. Fueling up for their autumn migration in the nectar garden Big Eddie and I'd planted.

I stepped outside to the patio. PZ knelt before a frost-nipped cherry tomato plant, murmuring how generous it was to share its fruits with him, and with the raccoons, squirrels, birds, and deer. The autumn chill had killed the tomatoes, but he didn't have the heart to pull them up. It would be up to Big Eddie and me to yank them, out of PZ's sight, and replant winter crops. On his knees now, PZ reached up, his fingers fluttering over the withered stems, as if he were a tailor for a queen, conducting a royal fitting.

I knew what I had to do now. First there was a feeling of lightness, as if I'd taken off a suit of armor, hung up my clanging coat of chain mail. I felt vulnerable, soft as a shucked mollusk.

I approached him slowly, tiptoeing.

He didn't look up. He cupped a snail in one hand, a kale leaf in the other.

Don't be scared, he whispered to it. Here, just for you. We have plenty to share. He set the snail down on a mossy rock.

I brought you a cup of mint tea, I said.

He turned. His long white night shirt fluttered on the wire hanger of his knobby frame.

Drink it for me?

He shook his head, with that awful look of agony on his face. PZ remained helpless, his former loathsome self-shackled him. He could not stand the pain he caused other sentient beings just by eating and breathing, by existing; the suffering he caused others in the past haunted him, crushed his will to live.

Please drink it, Daddy.

How strange to feel the word in my mouth. Daddy, I repeated. That word, like throwing a stone in a pond, as ripples of vague recognition in his eyes widened.

It's me, Daddy.

Clemmy.

Then those scrawny arms clasped me, the smell of sweat and flowers on his old skin. The cabbagey rot of his breath. Clemmy. He kissed my head.

My fortitude gave way.

I did this to you. I swallowed a sob as he held me. I'm sorry, Daddy. I'm so sorry. My chest felt as it were splitting open. I thought I could fix you, but I broke you.

I missed you, Clemmy.

I pulled away and met his silvery eyes, once hard as dimes. Now his gaze was vulnerable, guileless. His eyebrows, wiry and thick as a wizard's. From his ears, bristly hairs sprouted. My mother would groom him, tend him, soothe him, heal him.

I took my father's hand and we were silent for the longest time. The forest around us quiet but filled with busyness—scurrying and scratching, fluttering.

Let's get you ready, Daddy. I'm taking you home.