

The Winds of Purpose

by James Lynn Smith

The cool, damp air whipped about the old house, rattling the shutters. I ignored the gathering clouds outside and sat alone at the desk, fuming that Francine did not join me as planned.

When we met a few weeks ago she'd said, "My concoction is not like any other substance. I think it can work miracles for mental health. It's not an opiate, coke, or LSD-like compound."

"Let's see if I understand," I'd said. "This miracle substance is not habit forming, yet it can relieve people who are stressed out and usher in instant bliss."

"That's cute Mike. Wins the award for bonehead sarcasm. But this compound goes way beyond that. It's not simply a 'feel good' medication, nor a peaceful sleep pill. It has direct relevance to particular states of mind. The everyday Joe's purpose-driven perspective becomes overactive and dulls his senses. Gurus tell us to meditate and live in the present, but when we get quiet, our mind still chatters about the backlog at work, or how we should tell some idiot he left his brain in the funny papers. Being completely alive in the present is rare. This compound could help with that a lot."

"And if everybody used it, what would happen to progress?" I laughed. "Who would do the drudgery and planning?"

"Get real Mike, the effects wear off. We can always return to our uptight lifestyle and get our planning chart done later. But with less stress."

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Francine's mystery compound intrigued me because a year ago I started

writing a book about the role of obsessions and superstitions in human nature. I felt they were tied up with notions of purpose and intention because these take dedication and procedural planning. In excess, dedication becomes obsession and procedure becomes superstition, at least for our pre-scientific ancestors. A sense of purpose could optimize intention to completing tasks and getting job promotions, but too much leaves the mind with ineffective obsessions, blinding us to joy and further opportunity. In my writing, I was exploring the concept of purpose, trying to determine if the brain was hard-wired to have it and, if so, suggest how it could be controlled. But I still wasn't satisfied with the last chapter.

I remembered that, in his later years, my uncle had been interested in the same subject. He doubted there was any merit to teleology, the concept of a grand design and purpose in the universe. But he wondered if it were more than a philosophical issue and had to do with our basic biology and brain development.

One night he said, "Some people think we all have ESP, that we're basically psychic and can see spirits, read minds, and all that. But they also believe we have a suppressor in our brain that blinds 95 percent of us to this. If so, it may be a good thing. Uncontrolled intrusion from all those psychic waves could drive us insane. I've wondered if this suppressor in the brain is also what causes us to look ahead with a sense of purpose and replaces psychic intrusion with intention and action in the world. I've interviewed scholars, Jesus freaks, gurus, witches, and demon worshipers but never found an answer."

"Too bad there's not a pill for the answer, Uncle Bob," I said, trying to be amusing.

Years later when beginning my book, I came to the same questions he did. I remembered my facetious remark about a pill. So when I heard unofficially about Francine's work, I contacted her. At first she was blatant and uncooperative, but that passed.

Francine Patricia Jones was an eccentric chemist and avid seeker of the bizarre. With her penchant for excess, it's a wonder she had the patience to do a dissertation in psycho-pharmacology and finish graduate school. Either her professors thought she was a genius or perhaps were afraid of her. As soon as she was able, she gathered a rag-tag team and launched a trek into the jungles of South America to seek medical cures from the weird plant and animal life.

When we recently met she gave me the details. "I found a little tribe of natives who actually remained unknown to the outside world. Scared the hell out of me. There were skulls and other skeletal parts fastened to stakes around their huts. After some worry that my precious body was next on their menu, I began to earn their trust. By then I had dismissed everybody on my team but the translator."

"Why did the biochemist in you take an interest in them?"

"These natives had spirit rituals in which they used a powdered substance made from odd resins and insect parts. Several tribe members would tend to the one taking the stuff. He or she would simply light up with rapture and be highly observant and chatty about things others didn't even notice. I watched and took copious notes. It didn't matter if they swallowed, sniffed or smoked the stuff. Same effect. Next day or so, they were back to normal, but seemed more efficient and had fewer run-ins with others. Only saw one case where a subject became disturbed. Attendants rapidly began to chatter and soothe her, and she calmed. I wanted some of that powder so I was a sweet little darling and charmed the chief into giving me samples. Not an easy role since I was bigger than he was."

"Don't tell me. You synthesized the powder and made a pill."

"Yes, but in capsule form. This is not publically funded research. A lot of private money— some my own—went into this. The foundation I work for doesn't know about it yet. So don't talk about this until we can test it on the urban mind. Then I may propose it as a project and apply for funds to do formal research."

After she told me more, I said, “About the test. What if I were to volunteer? I need to understand more about this for the book I’m writing.”

Francine raised her eyebrows. “You’re as gutsy as I am—or just plain stupid.” She raised her hand in a hush sign. “Yes I know I’ve been talking this stuff up, but there is some risk. I’ve only tested it on rats and monkeys, and they can’t tell me anything. You’d need someone with you who’s trained to grapple with anything unexpected.”

We decided to do the test on me at a remote place with her monitoring for any complications. She gave me some capsules and I promised to arrange a place for the test.

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The two-story house served as an inn years ago when I last visited. Now it was vacant and in disrepair. Beneath the peeling paint, the old Victorian frame structure hinted at the history of those who lived here over the last hundred years. It sat high on a cliff with a commanding view of the bay below.

The owner’s agent arranged for us to be here and, for a fee, provided a couple to prepare meals while we stayed. But early this afternoon the message came by special carrier that Francine and her assistant could not join me. After preparing this evening’s meal early, the couple left to avoid driving in bad weather later. Now I was completely alone.

I rose from the desk located in an old library on the second floor, and walked out onto the veranda. The view was impressive, but today wind-driven waves made the waters restless, and the sky was darkening with rolling nimbus clouds. After staring for a while I went back inside and sat at the desk again.

Trying to read a bit from a magazine, I gave up, feeling my ire returning. I looked at my little bottle of capsules. Removing the cap, I poured one into my palm. *What would happen if I took one alone, without Francine as “guide?”*

Surely it wouldn't have too much effect on me, an urbanite with few preconceived notions. The native mind was different. They sensed frightening jungle spirits and deceased ancestors living inside trees. Being liberated from those concerns would make a powerful difference to them. *Did Francine exaggerate the effects of this stuff?* Maybe I could take just one to see. Perhaps I could get some hint of perspective on my questions. Popping a capsule into my mouth, I reached for a now-cold cup of coffee and took a swallow.

Thirty minutes later I was still at the desk. And nothing happened...at first. Then, perceptibly, the wind was more noticeable. Not louder, but clearer. I felt a strange fascination with the rattling shutters and the rise and fall of the wind's pitch. Looking down to the desk top, my hands looked strange and familiar at the same time. Noticing veins and joints; my mind pictured the skeletal parts, though they were not visible. I Picked up my ballpoint pen and gazed with intense appreciation at the slender cylindrical body tapering to a point. A point from which dark lines could be drawn on the tablet nearby. It was amazing how the lines did not smear and were absorbed only enough to firmly imprint the equally amazing uniformity of the paper. I swiveled in the chair in readiness to stand and felt the smoothness of the chair bearing, a thing in itself, not just an absence of resistance.

After standing I moved around the room, arms outstretched, as if dancing. The sensation of air moving through my fingers as I pivoted was like a blessing. One I would have never noticed before. I looked at the lamp, the door knob, the pattern in the carpet, and the grain of the wood floor near the edge of the room. Every object had a distinct thrill about it. Gazing at the lamp again and closing my eyes, light filtered through my eyelids and reddish, flickering patterns dazzled my brain. I laughed and clapped my hands repeatedly until nearly exhausted.

Moving back, I stumbled onto the opened hide-a-bed. The yielding pillows were like clouds of joy. Dozing momentarily, I seemed to be streaking through the

universe, oblivious to any intention or purpose. There were twinkling bright points gently swirling about. Then they began a slow, prickling convergence toward me.

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Searing pain stabbed my right arm like a volley of long needles. Attempting to cry out, no sound came from my voice. I tried to brush the points away, but they clung firmly. Nothing in the room was visible. A curtain of panic descended about me.

It lasted beyond my comprehension of endurance. Eventually I quit trying to call out. My mind pictured an image. It was me, staring with glazed eyes, silently mouthing the question *why?* Somehow, in the distance behind the wall separating my mind from the surroundings, I saw some dark, ominous *thing* moving, trying to get at me. It appeared to be searching while constantly changing shape.

In time the pain diminished. I began to see faint objects in the room: chairs, tables, desk. Slowly sitting up on the side of the hide-a-bed, I realized that my right arm had been asleep. The drug had removed any inhibitory barriers to pleasure and pain, both. The prickling discomfort had been enormously magnified. Although the room appeared the same, I sensed it as flat and dim. I thought about the *thing* I saw and shuddered.

Pouring coffee from the percolator on the desk, I sat down and tried to assimilate what had happened. After taking a few sips, I still felt no comfort and went out onto the veranda. Below, the eternal waves pounded the cliff base. Wind-driven waves moved through the tall grass on the planes to the left. In the sky, dark, boiling clouds appeared to be closing in. *I have to get away.* Turning to leave, I realized the danger of the approaching downpour. *The roads will be flooded.* Restless, I had to keep moving. I could not bear to sit or remain still. *God, help me. What is this mindset I'm trapped in?*

I tried to reason my way out. My uncle's speculations came to mind. Some

entity of my mind that suppressed hyper-sensing everything in the moment was now missing. An entity that may be necessary for sanity, even life itself. Without it we may be overcome with psychic waves reflecting horrible experience. The next thought brought a chill. *Specters are real*. I recalled stories of people being frightened to death by things no one else saw. There is much evil and pain in the world of which we are blithely unaware except through a filtered news outlet. One that we can watch or not. Now however, I had no defense against what would come against me.

I went into the hallway, pacing and mumbling as the floorboards creaked beneath the carpet. In a mirror I saw my reflection, a familiar but dimensionless, chalk-colored creature. Then I heard a noise and stopped...It was merely the wind banging a shutter. After resuming my pacing, I stopped again.

Hair on the nape of my neck stiffened. A peculiar odor permeated the air. I sensed what I can only describe as a dead bone odor. I felt as though pieces of squishy meat were under the carpet and my movement became sluggish. Then I knew. That *thing* was approaching, working its way toward me. Finally my legs moved and I bolted into the library again and slammed the door. I turned on every lamp, but felt that even the air was suffused by dimness. After sinking into a plush armchair, I stood again, feeling confined and helpless there. Everything I looked at seemed separate, meaningless and without consolation. A protective shell about my mind was weakening. Then the wind seemed to go silent. Too silent.

My legs felt weak and the skin on my scalp crawled. *It* was behind me, in the room. My protective shell shattered, and the thing surged toward me. *Death is better than this hell*. Bolting out onto the veranda, I ran toward the banister rail. I would leap over the cliff and end the madness. Tripping, I fell short of the rail. From behind a formless, dark horror leaped upon me.

I don't know how to explain it, but after contact, a golden light flooded the remote corners of my mind. The flatness gave way to depth, and I was buoyed by a sense of joy and purpose I never recognized until it left and returned.

Stiffly, I rose to my feet and walked back into the library. I supposed some of the drug had worn off, but not all. I stood several minutes, trying to formulate thoughts about the strange feeling within me. A highly vulnerable part of my mind had become separated from another part and saw that part as a horrible threat. But what it was really seeing was its own fearful interpretation.

I would completely rewrite the last chapter of my book. What I and others tended to reject was useless inhibition and obsession, traits society placed upon itself in the *name* of purpose. It was actually *insufficient* goals and intent that evoked these negative traits.

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My cell phone rang and I fumbled for it. "Hello."

"Mike, that you? I'm sorry we couldn't be there," Francine said.

"Rainstorms flooded the roads and we got stopped in a valley. Tried to call your cell phone, but I guess there wasn't a bee line with any cell tower over your way. I did manage to call a courier service to deliver the message. You get it?"

"Yes, it came. I was disappointed." *I might as well tell her.* "Francine, I took one of these capsules anyhow."

"Mike, you bonehead. That was...How did it affect you?"

"I don't think it's a wholesale cure-all for stress or a path to unobstructed delight. What it liberates is unpredictable."

"What do you mean?"

"I felt wonderful to awful and back again."

"To you that may mean something; to me it's cryptic. You need to explain."

"Take too long. I'll come see you when I get back. In general, I think it is

useful in research, but not for recreation or a blues buster.”

“Okay. But take care and wait out the storms. Bye.”

It was now quite late. I stepped out onto the veranda. The clouds were still dark, the wind blew, and waves in the bay continued to crash into the cliff below. But it was not foreboding. Instead it possessed an eerie excitement. In the clouds an unexpected opening widened, and for a moment the beauty of a full moon and several stars appeared. I felt as though they hung there with a proud and purposeful design.

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