Trials

A Short Story

By Maryanne Peters

Who volunteers for drug trials? There are a few who could be called genuinely altruistic, some who have a fascination with things medical, but most have self interest at heart. There are those who hope it will result in access to other treatment, and those who just want the money. Then there are those like David Nott who needed the money, and who was looking for an intensive observed trial to receive food and accommodation as well, staying in the research ward.

He was on the street, but he knew that vagrants would be disqualified – something about underlying health issues. He had to get clean, in both senses. But he could not even afford a proper haircut. He washed his hair in the park and tied it back. He washed himself as best he could. He stole some clothes from a clothesline. He went to join the queue, but there was none.

Perhaps if the purpose of the drug had been stated, more would have applied. The restoration and maintenance of youth – it has been the stuff of alchemy from time immemorial. But Sabastrom Corporation wanted confidentiality, for both scientific and commercial reasons, and perhaps legal reasons as well. Nothing was said.

Dr. Gillman might have said: “Anyone who expects anything more than adverse side effects is not what we need.” He wanted them to sign liability away. He worked on the very edge of science. It is a narrow path, and the fall off the edge is a long way down.

This was not a case for a wide study. He could start with just three. They should be people like David – no family to miss or to sue, no current employment and few prospects. The questions on the application form weeded out the ones who might present problems if it all went very bad.

But unlike the other two, David was intelligent. Dr. Gillman wondered how he had ended up in the place, but he declined to enquire. He should not get close to test subjects, human or rat. He just needed to administer the drugs and receive back the information by test results and interviews.

He would have preferred three isolated rooms, but he had one room with three beds and a table. He told the subjects not to discuss symptoms. He wanted no false results. But if he was looking for consistent responses, he was soon disappointed.

Subject A went into cardiac arrest on Day 11. Dr. Gillman would have preferred that he be removed from the room, but the crash cart was brought into the room, and while they did their best to screen of the resuscitation attempts with curtains, David and Subject C watched their colleague die within a few feet of their own beds.

Subject C went into a panic as a result. Dr. Gillman preferred to think that it was not the drug but a faulty sedative that caused the resulting brain damage, but it was not clear.

By rights he might well expect David to go into a panic himself at this point, but the truth was that David seemed almost oblivious. He was distracted, or you might say fascinated, by the effect of Dr. Gillman’s drug on him. On him anyway, it appeared to work.

David was aged just thirty but looked more than fifty. A life of tragedy leading to drugs leading to homelessness can do that to a man. His face was drawn and lined, or it had been before the trial. Now he saw somebody in the mirror that looked very different that the man who had walked in.

Dr. Gillman may not have noticed the changes to the same degree, but he did not know the face like the man wearing it. He was more interested in measurable things. The increase in bodyfat and other small changes might be down to an improved diet. He wanted to see cellular differences. He wanted to see a decrease in telomere attrition, an increase in proteostasis, changes in the chloroplasts. Some anomalies in the endocrinology were of no interest to him as they did not get to the heart of aging process.

He had to report this to the chairman. It was a very frank response.

“This trial is a nightmare”, the Chairman complained. “We have two out of three dead and no positive results. Shut it down. Clean up the mess. The last participant will need to be disposed of. How could you let him witness the other two subjects fail so badly? Get rid of this last one. If you cannot do it then I will send Harmison”.

“I will do it”, said Dr. Gillman. It was the only way to keep his job and all of the accumulated research that meant. Perhaps by accident his life was in the grip of Sabastrom Corporation. If the company’s “fixer” became involved he might find himself in danger. Whether or not it was is fault it was his mess and he had to clean it up.

He could do it at night. Every night Dr. Gillman dispensed sleeping medication, as he had done for all trial participants right from the beginning. But what he didn’t know was that David had decided several days ago that he would not swallow them. As he saw the changes in himself, he started to wonder about staying clean, and that starts with rejecting all drugs.

The drugs were powerful, so he had to pretend to be completely unconscious when attendants entered the ward after lights-out. It was something he just got used to doing.

That last night that is what he was doing when Dr. Gillman entered. He came right up to his bed and started talking to him.

“I know that you can’t hear me David, but I think that I owe you an explanation,” said the physician, clearly in the belief that he was talking to an unconscious man. “This trial was meant to do good. It was meant to save people from growing old. It sounds impossible, but we know so much about the aging process we hope find the cure. It will not be a permanent cure, but it will add years and good years, to the lives of a few who can afford it. So, I want you to know that your life was worth something. This trial has been a failure and all failed subject biological material must be destroyed. That is just the way things are. I am going to inject a fatal does of insulin into you. I did not want it to be this way. I wanted to do good. I wanted to …”.

The threat of imminent death releases adrenalin into the body. This is the hormone that powers fight or flight, but in this case, it powered both. Within easy reach was the small beside table which had a drawer that pulled out completely. It was that which David brought down upon the head of Dr. Gillman, knocking him out cold. He took the electronic tag clipped onto the researcher’s lab coat pocket.

David was wearing pajamas that carried the logo of Sabastrom Corporation – practical wear even during the day. But the first task once in the hall was to find something that could be worn outside. Past the first isolation barrier was a locker room where staff could change into hospital scrubs. In a research facility the night staff was limited. The lockers all seemed empty, until David happened upon one that was full.

But there was a problem. Everything was there – clothes, shoes, ID, money, car keys – all that was needed had been left in the locker of Angelica Brown. At the far end of the lockers was a full length mirror. David saw the reflection in it. He took of his pajama top. Perhaps what he saw might have shocked him a month ago, but somehow now it just seemed useful. The bottoms too, revealed that he was less of a man for whatever this drug trial had done to him. But even without underwear the dress fitted. There was just a bump in front that should not be there. He was able to fix that with two pieces of sleek tape from her shelf.

The shoes had a modest heel, but he found them easy to walk in, and a surprisingly good fit. There were only three cars in the carpark so he found hers easily. He needed to drive as far away as possible and definitely across at least one state line. Then he could consider what to do.

There were credit cards too. Perhaps he could sign for those. He could study the signature when there was light, but for now he knew that he had to drive. He figured that Sabastrom were big but would not have access to police resources. That made him more comfortable about using the credit card and creating a trail across three states.

But Kurt Harmison did have access to police resources. He just needed to know how this man David Nott thought that he could disguise himself as a female charge nurse Angelica Brown.

“As an unexpected side effect of the drug trial this man’s body has become quite rapidly feminized,” explained Dr. Gillman, still nursing his injury. “He is of slight build and his hair is long, and we have noticed the loss of body hair. He might be able to pass by appearance as a woman, even though he looks nothing like nurse Angelica Brown, but his actions should be a give him away”.

Kurt Harmison had a trail to follow, and a photograph of a man who might still be travelling dressed as a woman. The real nurse Angelica Brown had been persuaded not to cancel her card, and had been supplied with a company car. Kurt would receive updates. It was time for him to take to the road in pursuit.

Kurt Harmison was a very different person from David. He sat at the diner which was the place of the last transaction, browsing through the Sabastrom file on this particular subject. Here was somebody who had every opportunity but who had discarded it all for drugs and a life in a state of stupor. Kurt had chosen to live in the real world, and to slash and shoot his way through it.

Who had made the right choice? Was a man who surrendered himself to a dreamworld and whose only wrong was to pilfer a little cash for his next fix better than a man who would do anything for money. Who was real the breaker of moral law here? Who had the better claim to the right to live their life?

“I am looking for a brother and sister, one who may have come through here,” he said to the waitress. “Here is a photo of David Brown, but he may also be travelling with his twin sister, Angelica. I don’t have photo of her, but they are twins.”

“Oh yeah,” the waitress said. “I remember her. She was here a couple of days ago. She sat right over there. Keith Garrett from “The Lazy Bull” came over and talked to her. You know, “The Lazy Bull” off the West highway, just out of town. I think he offered her a job. I think she took it.”

Kurt felt that feeling that hunters know well. Like fresh sign on the trail, and the hint of fresh dung in the air – he felt that he was close. The adrenalin was rising.

He left a big tip, for what he thought was a big tip. He had some time before dark when evil deeds are best done, so he took it to check the country outside of town for places to dump a body. He was under instruction to burn the body if it could otherwise not be destroyed. There might be residues of an engineered drug that would lead to suspicions. He found a farm with a lime pit for dead stock which might do.

He then headed for “The Lazy Bull” – just your average roadhouse, with the neon sign being possibly the biggest investment.

He was looking for Angelica, the man dressed as a woman, so he took little notice of the woman behind the bar. Once he had surveyed the room he decided that he would have to wait. He sat at the inner end, with his back protected, a fire exit nearby and a view of the front door.

“What are drinking, Mister?” came the chirpy question. His eyes moved first to her breasts, which were showing in accordance with custom, for the custom. They were impressive, and certainly real. He felt almost guilty when he shifted his gaze up, but she was smiling, like a woman who knows who she is, and had him pretty well worked out already.

Her honey blonde hair was piled on her head, and her face was open and pretty, with arched eyebrows, long eyelashes and painted lips matching dangling earrings.

“You look like you have a lot on you mind, let me get you something to make your life easier,” she said.

He would normally order a beer and take his time, but he did like Scotch Whisky, so he asked for that, and a beer.

“I am Annie,” she said putting the drinks down. “And I am at your service.” There were only a few others at the bar, and there was a waitress waiting tables.

He would not ask whether she knew Angelica. That would draw attention to himself. He just smiled and reached into his jacket pocket for a furtive glance at the photo. He had to admire Annie’s butt as she worked the far end of the bar. It had a wonderful roundness to it, like two volleyballs in a bag.

Sometimes he hated his job, but it paid well and it had the added advantage that he knew that he was indispensable to Sabastrom Corporation – all the job satisfaction that he needed. But it made him a loner. He did things that disqualified him from leading a normal life, and having normal relationships. Annie was desirable but untouchable.

She turned and smiled at him, and he smiled back. It was like they had know one another since school, and maybe shared a secret.

And then it stuck him. Annie – Angelica. Could this be her? Could this be him?

It was a what-the-fuck moment to be sure. His first question – what have those scientists done to this person? Is this a sex change chemical? How far does it work? She has breasts, and a butt the stuff of dreams, but what else is going on? He should have been thinking about his job, but he was thinking about her.

“What time do you close?” he asked, but not with any plan in mind.

“It’s a week night so the kitchen closes soon and we close the bar after they have cleaned up,” she said. “Time for you to get in a couple more.”

He should not have, but he did.

Then there was just him and a drunk at the other end of the bar, and kitchen staff grabbing a drink for the road and helping the drunk outside.

“What’s your story, Annie?” he asked. “My name is Kurt, by the way.”

She smiled and called out to the others that she could lock up.

“If you can keep a secret, I am on the run,” she said. “But I have decided to stay here for a bit. My life has been changed, very suddenly. I was abused – brutalized even. I suppose that you don’t want to hear this – there must be so many women with this tale. But my tale is very different. I was a victim of a big corporation. They destroyed my past life, so I can’t go back to that. I have decided to make do with what I have. It was not my choice, but it seems to be working out for me.”

“Don’t think ill me for saying it, but you certainly have the assets,” he said.

“An accident from my point of view,” she said, cupping her breast and making Kurt wish her hands were his. “But sometimes we can turn accidents into happiness, don’t you think?”

“I hope so,” he said.

There was a moment of silence as they looked at one another, as if inviting the other to blurt something out that might change everything. Who would speak first?

There was still music coming from the back of the bar. It was a song they both recognized. Something sentimental that made them both smile as they looked into one another’s eyes.

“I feel that you deserve to have a long and happy life,” he said. “I don’t”.

“Maybe you need to do what I did,” she said. “Maybe if something unexpected has happened to you, you should make that you opportunity to change direction, just like I did. Maybe it will allow you to be a new person – somebody very different from the person that you were before.”

“You are Angelica Brown aren’t you?” he said.

The humor drained from her face, quickly turning to an expression of horror.

“I have just decided that I am on the run too, and I was wondering if we might run from here together,” he said.

The End

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*Erin’s seed: One of the people trying the drug out discover he's being feminized. The drug company panics and tried to have him killed to cover it up. He falls in love with an old friend who is the only one who tracked him down because he always knew his friend wanted to be a woman and he sort of loved the woman his friend wanted to be*