

# Heartwired

Love is the drug.

Joe Haldeman

Margaret Stevenson walked up the two flights of stairs and came to a plain wooden door with the nameplate 'Relationships, Ltd'. She hesitated, then knocked. Someone buzzed her in.

She didn't know what to expect, but the simplicity surprised her: no receptionist, no outer office, no sign of a laboratory. Just a middle-aged man, conservative business suit, head fashionably shaved, sitting behind an uncluttered desk. He stood and offered his hand. "Mrs Stevenson? I'm Dr Damien."

She sat on the edge of the chair he offered. "Our service is guaranteed," he said without preamble, "but it is neither inexpensive nor permanent."

"You wouldn't want it to be permanent," she said.

"No." He smiled. "Life would be pleasant, but neither of you would accomplish much." He reached into a drawer and pulled out a single sheet of paper and a pen. "Nevertheless, I must ask you to sign this waiver, which relieves our corporation of responsibility for anything you or he may do or say for the duration of the effect."

She picked up the waiver and scanned it. "When we talked on the phone, you said that there would be no physical danger and no lasting physical effect."

"That's part of the guarantee."

She put the paper down and picked up the pen, but hesitated. "How, exactly, does it work?"

He leaned back, lacing his fingers together over his abdomen, and looked directly at her. After a moment, he said: "The varieties of love are nearly infinite. Every person alive is theoretically able to love every other person alive, and in a variety of ways."

"Theoretically," she said.

"In our culture, love between a man and a woman normally goes through three stages: sexual attraction, romantic fascination and then long-term bonding. Each of them is mediated by a distinct condition of brain chemistry.

"A person may have all three at once, with only one being dominant at any given time. Thus a man might be in love with his wife, and at the same time be infatuated with his mistress, and yet be instantly attracted to any stranger with appropriate physical characteristics."

"That's exactly..."

He held up a hand. "I don't need to know any more than you've told me. You've been married 25 years, you have an anniversary coming up ... and you want it to be romantic."



"Yes." She didn't smile. "I know he's capable of romance."

"As are we all." He leaned forward and took two vials from the drawer, a blue one and a pink one. He looked at the blue one. "This is Formula One. It induces the first condition, sort of a Viagra for the mind."

She closed her eyes and shook her head, almost a shudder. "No. I want the second one."

"Formula Two." He slid the pink vial towards her. "You each take approximately half of this, while in each other's company, and for several days you will be in a state of mutual infatuation. You'll be like kids again."

She did smile at that. "Whether he knows he's taken it or not?"

"That's right. No placebo effect."

"And there is no Formula Three?"

"No. That takes time, and understanding, and a measure of luck." He shook his head ruefully and put the blue vial away. "But I think you have that already."

"We do. The old-married-couple kind."

"Now, the most effective way of administering the drug is through food or drink. You can put it in a favourite dish, one you're sure he'll finish, but only after it's been cooked. Above a hundred degrees centigrade, the compound will decompose."

"I don't often cook. Could it be a bottle of wine?"

"If you each drink half, yes."

"I can force myself." She took up the pen and signed the waiver, then opened her clutch purse and counted out ten £100 notes. "Half now, you said, and half upon satisfaction?"

"That's correct." He stood and offered his

hand again. "Good luck, Mrs Stevenson."

The reader may now imagine any one of nine permutations for this story's end.

In the one the author prefers, they go to a romantic French restaurant, the lights low, the food wonderful, a bottle of good Bordeaux between them.

She excuses herself to go to the ladies' loo, the vial palmed, and drops her purse. When he leans over to pick it up, she empties the vial into the bottle of wine.

When she returns, she is careful to consume half of the remaining wine, which is not difficult. They are both in an expansive, loving mood, comrades these 25 years.

As they finish the bottle, she feels the emotion building in her, doubling and redoubling. She can see the effect on him, as well: his eyes wide and dilated, his face flushed. He loosens his tie as she pats perspiration from her forehead.

It's all but unbearable! She has to confess, so that he will know there's nothing physically wrong with him. She takes the empty pink vial from her purse and opens her mouth to explain...

He opens his hand and the empty blue vial drops to the table. He grabs the tablecloth...

They are released on their own recognition once the magistrate understands the situation.

But they'll never be served in that restaurant again. ■

*Joe Haldeman has been a science fiction writer since 1969. He teaches writing every fall semester at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. His novels and short stories have won five Hugo and four Nebula Awards.*