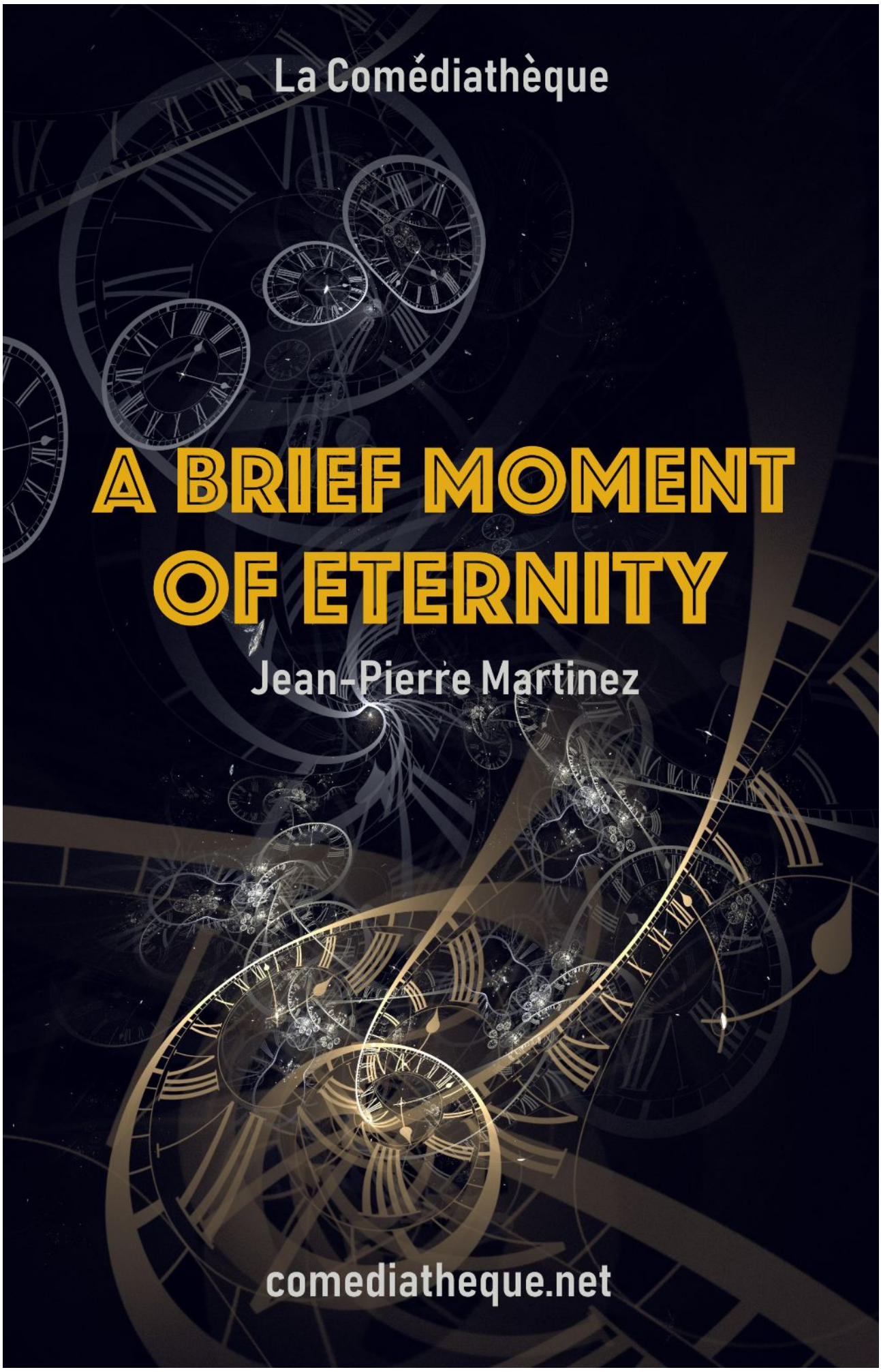

La Comédiathèque
A BRIEF MOMENT OF ETERNITY
Jean-Pierre Martinez
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A Brief Moment of Eternity

Jean-Pierre Martinez

Translation by the author

Peter, a researcher, has discovered a serum that could make human beings immortal. Knowing that such a discovery might have unforeseen consequences, he is ready to keep it secret. But his wife, desperate to remain young forever, and her lover, who wants to live forever too, are unwilling to make that sacrifice...

Characters
Peter – the husband
Diana – the wife
Vince – the lover

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A living room has been partly turned into a laboratory. Peter, wearing a white coat, is conducting mysterious experiments at a table covered with test tubes and other scientific equipment. An empty cage stands on the table, its door open. Peter sneezes. Diana comes in wearing a raincoat.

Diana – Bless you...

Peter – Thanks. How was your day?

Diana takes off her raincoat.

Diana – Same as usual... Couldn't you do all this somewhere else?

Peter – Where? My boss won't let me carry on with my research at the lab...

Diana – I wonder why...

Peter – I'll be finished soon. I promise.

Diana – We eat at this table, you know. You'll end up poisoning us!

Peter – I'm so close to a breakthrough. I can feel it.

Diana – A vaccine against the common cold...

Peter – Not you as well! You used to believe in me...

Diana – The man I married wanted to revolutionise medicine.

Peter – Who knows? Maybe that's exactly what I'm doing.

Diana – By curing the common cold? Oh, Peter... Even if you succeed, you're hardly going to win the Nobel Prize in Medicine for it.

Peter – That's not really my goal, but... why not?

Diana – Peter, we're not talking about a deadly epidemic. Nobody ever died of a bad cold!

Peter – It's a virus like any other.

Diana – Yes, but a much less dangerous one. Aren't there more serious diseases to tackle?

Peter sneezes again.

Peter – You say that because you never catch colds. You must have developed some kind of immunity. Perhaps I should use you as my guinea pig.

Diana – Thanks.

Peter – Come on, darling. You're a scientist too!

Diana – A scientist? No, I'm only a pharmacist. You never let me forget that. To you, a pharmacist is little more than a shopkeeper.

Peter – With research, you never know where it might lead. A vaccine against the common cold could be the first step towards something much more important.

Diana – Well, pharmacists certainly wouldn't thank you for it.

Peter – Why not? You'd be the ones selling the vaccine!

Diana – Exactly. One dose sold, one customer lost for life.

Peter – People would save money, be healthier and get more work done.

Diana – And our sales would collapse! Do you know how much we make from cold remedies every winter?

Peter – And you wonder why I compare you to shopkeepers...

Diana – Yes, but it's that shop which pays our mortgage...

Diana exits.

Peter – Gloria, nobody understands us. One day they'll see how wrong they were. But it'll be too late. We'll leave those poor mortals to their miserable fate, while you and I rule the world... *(Growing excited)* Rule? No, we'll be gods! *(Coming back to himself)* You agree, don't you? You're just too polite to say so. Gloria? *(He looks at the cage.)* Where's she gone now? *(He searches the room, calling softly.)* Gloria? Come here, sweetheart...

Diana comes back in. He stops abruptly, as if caught doing something wrong.

Diana – Were you calling me?

Peter – No, no, I...

Diana – Then who were you talking to?

Peter – No one. I was just... talking to myself.

Diana – That's reassuring... Oh, you won't believe this. I saw a rat in the kitchen yesterday morning.

Peter *(uneasy)* – Really...?

Diana – I even thought of bringing my gun home from the pharmacy...

Peter – You keep a gun at the pharmacy?

Diana – Of course. Vince told me to get one, remember? I've been held up three times.

Peter – Ah, yes...

Diana – Unfortunately, I can't find it anywhere.

Peter – Losing a gun is quite an achievement. It's not the kind of thing you just misplace... Unless someone stole that too.

Diana – It's not funny, Peter. You know I'm terrified of rats. How on earth did it get in?

Peter – Yes...

She gives him a suspicious look.

Diana – You don't seem particularly curious.

Peter – Of course I am...

Diana – You don't even look surprised.

He hesitates before confessing.

Peter – I'm sorry. It's Gloria.

Diana – Gloria?

Peter – My laboratory rat. She's female... Apparently she's worked out how to open her cage. She's very clever.

Diana – A rat? And you've given her a name? You're losing your mind, Peter!

Peter – I brought her home from the lab. Sometimes I think she's the only one who still believes in me...

Diana – You talk as though she were a colleague. She's a rat!

Peter – I began my experiments with her grandmother, years ago. I've become rather attached to the family.

Diana – Don't even think about it. I'm not living with a rat running loose just because you consider her one of the family.

Peter – She's just gone for a little walk...

Diana – You should have shut the cage! Locked it if necessary! I'm not spending another night here with a rat on the loose.

Peter – Calm down. It's not the end of the world.

Diana – I'll get upset if I want to! I've had enough, Peter. It's Gloria or me. Understood?

Peter – When she gets hungry, she'll come back. She's not used to finding her own food. I'll find her, I promise.

Diana – Well, I can't promise what state she'll be in. I couldn't find my gun, so this morning I left some wheat laced with arsenic in the kitchen.

Peter – Arsenic? That's barbaric! Poor Gloria! And where did you get arsenic?

Diana – I'm a pharmacist, remember?

Peter – So you need permission to buy half the medicines in a pharmacy, but you can bring home arsenic and a gun?

Diana – The arsenic is strictly controlled. Fortunately, even a mere shopkeeper like me has access to the stockroom.

Peter – I feel as if I'm living with a professional poisoner.

Diana – A professional would know how not to get caught.

Peter – You seem to know an awful lot about poisoning people.

Diana – If I ever wanted to escape my husband, I'd rather poison him than poison myself.

Peter – How comforting... But I'm very fond of Gloria.

Diana – You've spent more time with your laboratory rats than with your wife or friends for years now.

Peter – At least they've never let me down. And Gloria is the subject of my experiments. If you've killed her, I'll have to start all over again.

Diana – I won't have the patience to see it through. You have to pull yourself together, Peter. I won't always be here...

Peter – Oh, really?

Diana – It's not exactly what I meant, but...

Peter – Don't worry. I know exactly what you mean.

He goes out for a moment. Diana looks dejected. Peter returns with a bouquet of flowers and holds it out to her. She is astonished.

Peter – To apologise for not being much of a husband lately...

Diana *(more embarrassed than pleased)* – Thank you, but...

Peter – I'm taking you to our favourite restaurant tonight. The one where I proposed, all those years ago...

Diana – Really...?

Peter – You haven't forgotten what today is, have you?

Diana – Oh, right...

Peter – You forgot our wedding anniversary.

Diana – Usually you're the one who forgets things like that...

Peter – See? Things can change. Even I can change...

Diana *(taking the flowers)* – Thank you...

Peter – I've booked a table for nine. Is that all right? Or shall I put it back a little?

Diana – Well, I... I invited Vince round for a drink.

Peter – Before dinner?

Diana – We can still go to dinner afterward.

Peter *(dryly)* – With Vince?

Diana prefers not to answer.

Diana – I'll put the flowers in water.

She exits. Peter resumes the search for his rat.

Peter – Gloria? Come on, sweetheart! Unless you want to end up in an early grave... *(He searches the room for a moment, then goes out, still calling.)* Gloria?

Diana returns with the flowers in a vase.

Diana – If you prefer, I can cancel with Vince...

She realises Peter has gone, sighs and tries to make room for the vase on the table.

The doorbell rings. She puts down the vase and goes to answer it. She returns with Vince, a smartly dressed, self-assured man.

Vince – Have you talked to him?

Diana – No... It wasn't the right time.

Vince – When exactly is a good time to tell your husband you're leaving him?

Diana – It's our wedding anniversary... I forgot.

Vince – I see...

Diana – I can't tell him I'm leaving him for his best friend on our wedding anniversary.

Vince – We can't wait much longer. You are pregnant, remember?

Diana – That's one thing I haven't forgotten.

Vince – And you're certain it's mine?

Diana – How tactful of you.

Vince – Sorry, but...

Diana – Peter and I could never have children. We never really tried to find out which of us was responsible...

Vince – Well, now you know.

Diana – Besides, the only close relationships he's had lately are with his lab rats...

Vince – He'll soon have all the time he wants for his private research.

Diana – What do you mean by that?

Vince – If you won't leave him, I'll have to. I've kept him on at the lab for years because of you. I can't do it any longer.

Diana – Not today, Vince. Not tonight, please.

Vince – The lab is struggling. I don't run a charity. I have shareholders to answer to.

Peter comes back, having changed his clothes. He still looks less elegant than Vince.

Peter – Oh, hi Vince.

Vince – Evening, Peter. I hope I'm not intruding.

Peter – Not at all. Diana forgot to mention you were coming. Perhaps she wanted it to be a surprise...

Vince glances at the table cluttered with research equipment.

Vince – I see you're bringing work home...

Peter – Yes...

Vince – I take it this isn't the new project I asked you to work on.

Peter tries to avoid the question, but Diana takes it up.

Diana – Oh yes! That revolutionary anti-ageing night cream. Well, Peter? Are you going to find the miracle ingredient that keeps women young forever?

Peter – Cosmetics aren't exactly my field...

Diana – Pity. I might be in the market for an anti-ageing cream soon.

Peter – Come on, darling. You're still way too young for that.

Vince – So you still haven't given up on that cold vaccine?

Peter – Strange how much it upsets everyone. Especially for such an insignificant project, as you keep telling me.

Vince – Sorry to be practical, but cold remedies bring in a lot of money. Don't expect me to celebrate the prospect of those sales disappearing. If you were saving the world from a deadly epidemic, that would be different.

Peter – Yes... That's what Diana tells me too.

Vince – I'd prefer you to focus on cosmetics. That's where the real money is. The shareholders are getting restless, Peter. I may have to cut away some dead wood...

Peter – That sounds suspiciously like a warning.

Diana – Let's not spend the whole evening talking about work.

Vince – Sorry, Diana. So, what are we talking about?

Peter – No, you're right. I've taken advantage of our friendship over the years. I can't expect you to fund research that only seems to matter to me.

Vince – So you're giving up?

Peter – Let's say I'll give myself until the end of the month. One last test. If it fails, I'll stop and concentrate on beauty products. And on you, darling. I promise.

Diana – Very well... So, are we having a drink, yes or no?

Vince – That's why we're here, isn't it?

Peter – Won't you join us for dinner? I booked for two, but I can call the restaurant...

Vince – Not tonight, Peter. Diana's right. I don't think the timing is right...

Peter – You remembered? Diana forgot. Can you believe it?

Vince – She must have had something else on her mind...

Peter – My wife forgets our anniversary, but my best friend remembers.

Vince – I was your best man, after all...

Peter – That's true.

Diana *(uneasily)* – So, what can I get you both to drink?

Blackout

An espresso machine now stands on the table beside the laboratory equipment and the cage. Peter studies his results, a cup in his hand. Diana comes in and notices the machine.

Diana – You bought an espresso machine?

Peter – Yes. We have the same model at the lab, and now I work from home too...

Diana – I see. You wanted all the comforts of the lab at home. *(Approaching the machine)* Does it take coins or tokens?

Peter – It's free. Although there's a little basket beside it for contributions. Coffee capsules are so expensive these days... *(She stares at him.)* I'm joking!

Diana – Right. And where are the capsules?

Peter – In the basket.

Diana – I'll try not to mix them up with your deadly experiments.

Peter – Try the extra-strong one in the morning. It could wake the dead.

Diana – Thanks for the advice.

She places the capsule and starts the machine.

Peter – I probably shouldn't say this, but I was disappointed by dinner last night. *(She looks surprised.)* No, not by us! By the restaurant. The food used to be better, didn't it?

Diana – Better? You mean before we got married?

Peter – We did go there a few times after, didn't we?

Diana – It's not the restaurant that's changed, Peter. It's us. We were young. We were in love.

Peter – We were hungry...

Diana – We didn't need three drinks to work up an appetite.

Peter – We couldn't afford three drinks.

Diana – Not even one.

Peter *(imitating a waiter)* – Would you like something to drink before dinner?

Diana – No, thanks...

Peter – Just the cheapest wine you have, please.

Diana – We need to talk, Peter.

Peter – Yes...

Diana – I haven't got forever, you know. I'm not getting any younger...

Peter – Neither am I...

Diana – But it's different for a woman. I can't wait any longer, Peter. I can't keep waiting for you. You can see what's happening to us...

Peter – I couldn't find the poisoned wheat you left in the kitchen.

Diana – The rat must have eaten it.

Peter – Poor Gloria.

Diana – She's a lab rat, not a pet.

Peter – Yes, but I had administered my serum to her.

Diana – Your serum?

Peter – I mean my vaccine.

Diana – Is it really a vaccine against the common cold?

Peter – What?

Diana – Your research. Is it really a cold vaccine?

Peter – Sometimes you go looking for one thing and find something quite different.

Diana – It happens with people too, Peter. Sometimes you're looking for one person... and find someone else.

Peter starts searching again.

Peter – Even dead, she must be somewhere...

Diana – I'll get ready.

Peter – You wanted to talk.

Diana – Not now. You're miles away. Perhaps when you've finished mourning Gloria...

Diana leaves.

Peter – I'm going to need another test subject, I'm afraid. *(He notices something in the cage and goes to look.)* Gloria! You're back! And you look wonderful! Incredible. You survived the dinner my delightful wife prepared for you. Lucky you. My own dinner didn't go down nearly so well. Come on, back to work. You really are full of surprises...

Peter goes out carrying the cage. Diana comes back and finishes her coffee. The doorbell rings. She answers it and returns with Vince.

Vince – So, how was that little romantic dinner...?

Diana – Please, Vince, not now.

Vince – It wasn't the right time yesterday. When exactly will it be?

Diana – I don't know...

He embraces her.

Vince – I love you, Diana. And I can't wait any longer.

Diana – Neither can I, but you know how much I hate a scene.

He kisses her. She allows it, then pulls away.

Diana – Are you mad? He might catch us!

Vince – Good. Then we wouldn't have to explain.

Diana – Not like this, Vince. We've been married for years. I'll tell him, I promise...

Vince – When?

Diana – When the time is right.

Vince – Fine. Let me decide when the right time is, shall we?

Diana – Okay.

Vince – And I say it's right now. Do you love me or not?

Diana – Of course...

Vince – And him? Do you still love him?

Diana – No, I swear...

Vince – Then if you don't tell him, I will.

Diana – I'll tell him. It's better if it's me.

Vince – Tell him now. I'll wait at the café downstairs. Come and meet me with your suitcase when you've spoken to him. You're staying with me tonight.

Diana – It's a promise.

Vince – We can collect the rest of your things later.

Diana – You're right; we need to put an end to this.

Vince – I know it's hard. You're closing one chapter of your life. But we're about to start a new one.

Diana – I know. Now please go.

Vince – And if it goes badly, call me. I'll come straight up. Okay?

Diana – Okay.

Vince leaves. Peter returns. He seems very agitated.

Peter *(distracted)* – Oh, you're still here... I thought you'd gone.

Diana – Peter, I really need to talk to you this time. *(Peter nervously rifles through his notes.)* You can't keep avoiding it. Are you listening?

Peter – I think I've found something.

Diana – Found what?

Peter – I'm a researcher, remember? Sometimes researchers actually find things. Even me.

Diana – Your cold vaccine?

Peter – Much better.

Diana – The flu vaccine already exists. You do know that?

Peter – I was never really working on a cold vaccine. It was an excuse.

Diana – An excuse?

Peter – A cover story, to keep them off my back at the lab.

Diana – You were never looking for a cold vaccine?

Peter – Well, at first I was. But then I realised it could be a way to... a way into...

Diana – Could you finish a sentence?

Peter – It's not easy to explain.

Diana – Try.

Peter – Life's a swindle, Diana.

Diana – If that's your great discovery, you needn't have spent years in a laboratory to find it.

Peter – Our cells come with built-in obsolescence. Like a washing machine that's designed to wear out.

Diana – You don't have to talk to me as if I'm an idiot. I studied medicine too, before I became a shopkeeper.

Peter – I used the common cold virus to get inside cells and repair them.

Diana – Meaning...?

Peter – I've found a way to switch off the genetic mechanism that tells cells when to die.

Diana – You mean that...

Peter – I think I've discovered a serum for eternal life.

Diana is stunned.

Blackout

Peter is checking his notes and working feverishly with the equipment. Diana watches, visibly agitated. At last he looks up and starts pacing.

Diana – And you're absolutely sure?

Peter – It was the final test I mentioned yesterday. With Gloria.

Diana – Gloria? Who's Gloria?

Peter – My rat, you know...

Diana – Oh yes, right.

Peter – I gave her the serum yesterday morning. I've checked the results. There's no doubt about it. Her genetic make-up has changed. Her DNA should allow her to live forever.

Diana – Unfortunately, by now she'll probably have died of something other than old age. She ate all the arsenic-laced wheat I left for her.

Peter – That's the truly extraordinary part. Gloria survived. Look, there she is, running on her wheel!

Diana – So as well as never ageing, she might be immune to other causes of death?

Peter – Possibly. We know she's resistant to arsenic, at least.

Diana *(looking at the cage)* – She certainly looks healthy for a rat that swallowed enough poison to kill a fully grown man.

Diana's phone rings. She checks who is calling but does not answer.

Peter – Aren't you going to answer? It might be important.

Diana – Important? After what you've just told me? *(The phone keeps ringing.)* I'll send a message so I can have some peace. *(She sends a hurried message. Peter also types on his phone.)* I can hardly take in what this discovery means...

Peter – Yes, me too.

Diana – In any case, for now, we shouldn't tell anyone.

Peter – You're the only person I've told.

Diana – Not even Vince?

Peter – Not yet...

Diana – And you're sure you can make more of it?

Peter – I think so. There's only a little left of the original batch, after Gloria's dose. But I know how to make another.

Diana – You've written the formula down, of course?

Peter *(tapping his head)* – It's all in here. Safer that way.

Diana – I'm not sure that's very sensible.

Peter – Why not?

Diana – I don't know... in case something happened to you.

Peter – That's exactly why I'm keeping it to myself. Knowing the formula may be my best life insurance.

Diana – You're like a wizard guarding the secret of his magic potion. But you really can make more?

Peter – Of course, it would take me a bit of time but...

Diana – How long?

Peter – Two or three weeks, perhaps. Less with proper facilities. Remember, I've been working in the living room.

Diana – Once the news gets out, there'll be no stopping it.

Peter – People argue over the tiniest change to an ordinary vaccine. Imagine the reaction to a serum that lets them live forever.

Diana – It would be a riot.

Peter – That's why I need time to think. Its consequences could be even more catastrophic than the invention of the atomic bomb.

Diana – Still, it's not exactly the same thing.

Peter – Allowing everyone to live forever could do more harm to the planet than killing people early.

Diana – Exactly how much serum is left?

Peter – I don't know... Not much.

Diana – Enough to test on humans?

Peter – It's still an experimental vaccine.

Diana – What's the worst that could happen? Apart from becoming immortal. Well?

Peter – Enough for two people, at most.

Diana – Two people...

Peter – I honestly don't know what to do. I always knew this moment might come, but now that it has...

Diana – You're right... We shouldn't rush.

Peter – I can't keep something like this secret forever. Especially once I tell Vince...

Diana – But you haven't told him yet, right?

Peter – No.

Diana – Perhaps there's a way to buy ourselves some time.

Peter – What?

Diana – We test it on ourselves!

Peter – The two of us?

Diana – Like those scientists who experimented on themselves!

Peter – I hardly recognise you. An hour ago you said I was wasting my time and should be making face creams. Now you're offering your body to science.

Diana – You told me you were making a cold vaccine, not an immortality serum!

Peter – Yeah, obviously...

Diana – Just as a precaution. We try it, see what happens and take our time deciding what to do. We'd have all the time in the world. We'd be immortal!

Peter – I don't know... We need to think about what it would mean, even for us.

Diana – What consequences?

Peter – The consequences... of living forever!

Diana – I'm ready to take the risk. We'll see afterward.

Peter – It's a huge decision. The process may be irreversible.

Diana – Peter, we're talking about never dying and never getting old! Some people would kill for that!

Peter – Yes. That's precisely what worries me.

The doorbell rings.

Diana – Who could that be?

Peter – It's Vince.

Diana – How do you know?

Peter – I sent him a text earlier, asking him to come.

Diana – Oh really? Why?

Peter – He's my boss. He runs the lab. I may have made the discovery at home, but I'm still under contract. Legally, everything I discover may belong to the company.

Diana – Are you sure about that?

Peter – I checked my contract. *(The bell rings again.)* I'd better let him in. I did invite him.

Peter goes to open the door and comes back with Vince.

Peter – That was quick. Were you nearby?

Vince – Downstairs, at the café. So what's going on?

Peter – I hardly know where to start. You must be wondering why I called you over so urgently...

Vince – I have an idea...

Peter – Really? *(To Diana)* Have you told him? Was that what your message was about?

Diana – No... Well, yes... I think there's been a misunderstanding.

Vince – A misunderstanding? Look, Peter, we're friends. We work together. But there are times in life when...

Diana – Why don't you just listen to what Peter has to say?

Vince – I'm here for that.

Peter – Are you sure you don't want to sit down?

Vince – I'm fine, thanks...

Diana – I warn you, this is big.

Vince – Can we stop this little performance and get on with it?

Peter – All right. For years I've told you I was working on a vaccine against the common cold.

Vince – Yes...

Peter – Well, that's not true.

Vince – Really...

Peter – I was working on something much more ambitious. And today it finally worked.

Vince – What have you invented, Einstein? Hair-growing cream?

Peter – A serum for eternal life.

Vince is stunned.

Vince – Is this a joke? You dragged me here to make a fool of me?

Peter – Calm down, it's serious, I assure you.

Vince – And you, aren't you saying anything?

Diana – It's not a joke, Vince.

Peter – I've always been interested in ageing: how cells grow old and how we might stop it by changing their genetic code. Plenty of other scientists are working on the same problem.

Vince – No... But no one has succeeded yet.

Peter – Well, I have...

Vince – You? Here? In your dining room?

Peter – The cold virus was my Trojan horse. I modified it to enter cells and change how they function, switching some mechanisms off and others on. I was almost there when you ordered me to stop.

Vince – Why didn't you tell me anything?

Peter – I wanted to be sure. And I needed time to think. To take precautions.

Vince – Precautions?

Peter – To protect the discovery before deciding, in good conscience, what to do with it.

Vince – Good conscience? You've found the secret of eternal life and you're worried about your conscience?

Diana – Just because science can do something doesn't mean it should.

Peter – And for now, this stays strictly between the three of us.

Vince seems to be starting to believe him.

Vince – It would certainly be an incredible breakthrough for the lab...

Diana – For the lab? Vince, we're talking about never dying. Better still, never growing old. Not just another anti-ageing cream!

Vince – You're right. It's enormous.

Diana – Congratulations, Peter. You always were the cleverest of us...

Vince does not entirely appreciate this.

Vince – You've put the results somewhere safe, I hope? They're at the lab?

Peter – Everything's here.

Vince – Here?

Peter – You banned me from working on it at the lab!

Vince – We have to announce it immediately. And patent it. Other teams might be getting close...

A pause.

Diana – Peter isn't sure he wants to make the discovery public.

Vince – Hesitating?

Peter – This isn't just another discovery, Vince. It would change everything. The economy, society, philosophy, religion... Everything!

Diana – People argue about the ethics of bringing babies into the world. Imagine the arguments when science starts offering eternal life.

Vince – And here on earth, not in some promised afterlife...

Peter – Exactly. We'd be playing... gods.

Vince – I could live with that.

Peter – It isn't that simple. We're talking about overturning civilisation. I don't think the world is ready.

Vince – I understand. We can't just drop a bomb like this without thinking. But the discovery belongs to the lab too, remember.

Peter – You don't understand what's at stake.

Vince – I'm just reminding you what the law says.

Peter – Are you threatening to sue me for the patent?

Vince – Why not?

Diana – With the speed of the courts, you might have to be immortal to live long enough to see the verdict.

Peter – When I said it was all here, Vince... *(He points to his head.)* I meant here.

Vince – Maybe a punch in the face would help you remember who paid for your research.

Diana – Stop it, both of you! This is ridiculous!

Peter – See? It's already begun. I'll make my decision, in my own time. You won't beat the secret of eternal life out of me.

Diana – There's a sentence I never expected to hear in my living room...

Vince – I see. You've been talking to other laboratories.

Peter – This isn't about money. It's an ethical question.

Vince – Ethics? Since when has the pharmaceutical industry worried about ethics?

Peter – If I do give my discovery to a laboratory, I promise it'll be yours.

Vince – You can't seriously be thinking of destroying a discovery that could benefit the whole world!

Diana – That would be rather selfish. Think of me. I mean... think of us.

Peter – If you'll excuse me, I need a little peace to think.

He exits.

Vince – Do you really think he can do that?

Diana – People have been looking for the secret of eternal life for centuries. Nobody thought it was possible. But perhaps... perhaps it is.

Vince – I meant, do you think that idiot might actually destroy his research? You heard him. It's all in his head. One heart attack, one road accident...

Diana – He's an idealist. He always has been. So yes, he might.

Vince – After all I've done for him.

Diana – Don't exaggerate. You're sleeping with his wife and you were about to fire him.

Vince – What if we found the serum ourselves? We could have it analysed.

Diana – I don't know where he's hidden it. He said he'd taken precautions.

Vince – The crafty bastard...

Diana – Besides, there's hardly any left. Barely enough for two people.

Vince – That would be enough for the two of us...

Diana – Yes...

Vince – Unless he chooses to share it with you... You're not planning to have a baby behind my back, are you?

Diana – Given the circumstances, I'd choose my words more carefully.

Vince – Oh. Right. Sorry...

Diana – If he finds out about us, do you think he'll want to share anything?

Vince – You're right. We'd better keep quiet.

Diana – See? I told you it wasn't the right time.

Vince – All right. No need to rub it in.

Diana – So, what do we do?

Vince – We have to persuade him. Make him an offer.

Diana – Power and money have never meant much to Peter.

Vince – Then what?

Diana – Leave it to me. I know him better than anyone. I'm his wife. I'll call when I've convinced him.

Vince – So you can make up in bed and cut me out? No chance. I'm staying.

Peter returns.

Vince – So, have you thought it over?

Diana gives him a furious look at his lack of tact.

Diana – Peter, I just want to tell you how proud I am. I had my doubts sometimes, of course. But deep down I knew you'd surprise us all one day.

She makes an affectionate gesture. Vince gives her a furious look in return.

Vince – Think about it! The Nobel Prize is practically yours! And the money... Peter, we've struck gold!

Peter – I only came in for a coffee.

He starts the espresso machine.

Vince – Funny, we have the exact same one at the lab.

Peter – Relax. I haven't stolen the coffee machine from your lab. I bought my own, with my own money. Just as I paid for my experiments myself after you banned them at work.

Peter takes his cup and leaves.

Diana – Well done. Very subtle.

Vince – You can talk! You'd sleep with him just to get your hands on the serum!

Diana – And you really know how to charm a woman. Sleep with him? He's my husband!

Vince – The husband you were going to leave a few hours ago...

Diana *(excitedly)* – Anyone would do anything to stay young forever...

Vince – Anything? Even leave me?

Diana *(with a chilling expression)* – Even kill.

Vince – You're starting to frighten me. I thought I knew you.

Diana struggles to regain her composure.

Diana – I'm sorry... *(She touches him tenderly.)* I think this whole business is driving us mad.

Vince – Hardly surprising.

Diana – We need to calm down and think.

Vince – Maybe there's enough for all three of us?

Diana – He said barely enough for two. And it's experimental. He's only tried it on Gloria.

Vince – Gloria? Who's Gloria? Don't tell me he has a lover too!

Diana – It's a rat.

Vince – A rat?

Diana – His laboratory rat. He says she's immortal. I tried to poison her with arsenic, but it didn't work!

Vince – I'm not sure I've followed all that...

Diana – Perhaps I should be the only one to test it, just in case it's dangerous...

Vince – How brave of you! What a selfless sacrifice for science. I never knew you cared so much about medical research.

Diana – It would take years to get approval to sell a new drug. We'll be dead by then.

Vince – And governments would have something to say about it. Imagine if nobody ever died.

Diana – We can barely afford to pay pensions as it is.

Vince – On the other hand, people could keep working forever...

Diana – You're right. It might not be that simple...

They reflect for a moment in silence.

Vince – What time is it?

He checks his watch.

Diana – What are you thinking?

Vince – Right now? I'm starving. I ordered something at the café, but I left before I could eat it.

Diana – At least you haven't lost your appetite. I'll make some sandwiches.

Diana exits. Peter returns.

Vince – Diana is preparing sandwiches for us...

Peter – She's no great cook, but she does make a very good sandwich.

Vince – Sorry about earlier. I lost my temper. But a discovery like this is enough to go to anyone's head.

Peter – Is there anything else you'd like to tell me?

Vince – Actually, yes. I've been wanting to tell you something for a long time...

Peter – I'm listening...

Vince – I... I've got... Well...

Peter – Yes?

Vince – It's not easy to say.

Peter – Don't worry. I already know.

Vince – Oh, really?

Peter – You really must think I'm an idiot.

Vince – I'm not sure we're talking about the same thing.

Peter – Well, what are you talking about?

Diana returns unnoticed behind them.

Vince – I've... I have cancer.

Peter – Is it serious?

Vince – Of course it's serious! Have you ever heard of a harmless cancer?

Peter – I'm so sorry. If there's anything I can do...

Vince – The doctors say I only have a few months left...

Peter – Oh, damn...

Vince – A year at most. So you see, an experimental treatment is a risk worth taking. At worst, it would shorten my suffering by a few weeks.

Peter – Really?

Vince – If we follow the official procedure for human trials, it'll take years.

Peter – Yes, that's true.

Vince – I'm willing to take the risk, Peter.

Peter – For the sake of science, of course.

Vince – Exactly. If you'll test it with me, that is.

Peter – Thank you...

Vince – I've always supported you, haven't I? Besides, one lifetime won't be enough to develop this discovery. You're a brilliant scientist.

Peter – Please.

Vince – But you're no businessman. You'll need someone beside you. Someone to look after you...

Diana – You've got some nerve!

They turn to find that Diana has heard everything.

Vince – Oh, you were here...

Diana – Don't listen to him, Peter. He hasn't got cancer. He's perfectly healthy, the lying bastard.

Vince – How would you know? I might be ill and simply not have told you.

Diana – Call it a hunch. They say the good die young. So with or without the serum, you've got a very long life ahead of you.

Vince – You bitch!

Peter – That's my wife you're talking to.

Vince – Your wife! Let's talk about your wife. She's been sleeping with anything that moves!

Diana – Really? Such as who?

Vince realises he spoke too quickly.

Peter – Yes. Who?

Diana – Your best friend, for a start. The one with the terminal illness.

Vince – You bitch!

Peter – Am I interrupting? I've just found out my wife's unfaithful, and now I have to listen to the two of you arguing like a married couple?

Vince – I'm sorry, Peter. It was a mistake. An accident. She was the one who...

Diana – Oh yes, I forced myself on him. Took advantage of his vulnerable state. That terrible illness, you see...

Vince – All right, I'm not ill. I only said that so I could volunteer for the trial, even if it killed me.

Diana – Such a noble sacrifice.

Vince – I'd actually decided to end the affair. I couldn't bear it any longer. That's why I came tonight. To tell him.

Diana – Of course you did...

Vince – Unlike Diana, I've always believed in you. I've always supported you.

Diana – He came to tell you he was leaving with your wife and firing you from the lab!

Peter – I'm disappointed... Very disappointed. My wife... My best friend...

Diana – I assure you that...

Peter – Both of you, shut up!

Vince – Listen, Peter...

Peter – Get out. I need some air. Leave me alone.

The other two leave, looking rather ashamed. Peter waits until they are gone and begins whistling cheerfully.

Peter – I told you, Gloria. People are far worse than rats. At least I can trust you. Imagine, that woman wanted to poison you! Luckily, I found the arsenic-laced wheat before you had it for a snack. *(He takes a little bag out of his pocket and empties it into a coffee grinder.)* I wonder what arsenic tastes like mixed with coffee...

He grinds the wheat with the coffee, then carefully puts the mixture into an empty coffee capsule. He seals it and returns it to the basket with the others. Vince and Diana come back.

Vince – Sorry, but we'd rather not leave you on your own.

Diana – We want to make sure you don't do anything stupid.

Vince – Something desperate, in a moment of anger, that you might regret.

Peter – If I did something truly desperate, I doubt I'd be around to regret it.

Diana – We were thinking more of... you destroying the evidence of your discovery.

Peter – So that's it... Well, since you're here, let's settle this. I've made my decision.

Vince – We're listening. And we'll respect your decision, whatever it is. Won't we, Diana?

Diana – Absolutely.

Peter – I've worked on this for years. I've had plenty of time to consider what immortality would mean for humanity.

Diana – And...?

Peter – I think it would be hell.

Vince – Hell? You're exaggerating.

Peter – Apart from the enormous social and economic upheaval, there would be no new generations. Why have children if nobody ever dies?

Vince – I've done very well without children. So have you. What's the problem?

Peter – We'd be old people trapped in young bodies. A stagnant world, without renewal or change.

Vince – Change isn't always an improvement.

Diana – Especially when things change for the worse.

Peter – Life has to be a cycle. A circle, not an endless straight line leading nowhere.

Diana – This may surprise you, Peter, but I almost agree.

Vince – Really?

Diana – That's why I suggest keeping it secret and testing it on ourselves. Then we'll have forever to decide what to do with it.

Peter – No, Diana. Living forever would be a life sentence. Even for us.

Vince – That's one life sentence I'd happily accept.

Peter – It sounds wonderful now. But imagine when everyone we know is dead.

Diana – I'm not sure I'd miss many of them...

Vince – I agree with you on that.

Peter – By sixty, many people have lost their ambitions, their friends, even their families.

Diana – Speak for yourself.

Peter – By eighty, many are tired of life.

Vince – Not everyone...

Peter – By a hundred, some are simply waiting for death to release them. Imagine how they'd feel after two or three hundred million years.

Diana – Two or three hundred million? Sounds like winning the lottery to me. I'd settle for that, even if I had to die in agony at the end.

Vince – People get tired of life because they're old and ill.

Diana – Your rat even survived arsenic!

Vince – If we ever get tired of living, we can always kill ourselves!

Peter – With arsenic?

Silence.

Diana – All right, so what have you decided?

Peter – We're playing with forces we don't understand. When human beings try to become gods, it always ends badly. The ancient Greeks knew that. They invented tragedy.

Vince – Could you put that in plain English?

Peter – I'm destroying the serum. No one will ever use it. Gloria will be the only immortal creature on earth. Perhaps she'll evolve, given enough time. Who knows? Our distant descendants may worship her as a goddess one day. All hail Gloria!

Diana – But you're completely insane!

Peter – I've always thought it wasn't God who created us, but that one day we'd end up creating God.

Vince – Or maybe he's messing with us...

Peter – You said you'd respect my decision, whatever it was.

Diana – We won't let you do this.

Vince – Where is this vaccine?

Peter – You won't find it. I've hidden it somewhere you'd never think to look.

Vince – That's what you think...

Diana – Be reasonable. If you made this discovery, someone else will eventually make it too.

Vince – It's not as if you're the only genius in the world!

Diana – So why not be remembered as the person who gave humanity eternal life?

Vince – Enough! Where's the serum?

Peter – You won't get it.

Vince – I've paid your salary for years. Now it's time you earned it.

Diana – Be reasonable, Peter.

Vince – Then we'll have to kill him. He said himself there isn't enough for three.

Diana – Perhaps we should keep the secret to ourselves. What's the point of being immortal if everyone else is too?

Vince – You're going to tell us where it is and how to make more.

Vince moves towards him threateningly. Peter pulls out a revolver. Vince stops.

Peter – I knew this might happen. I warned you I'd taken precautions.

Diana – That's my gun!

Vince – You have a gun?

Diana – From the pharmacy. You told me to buy one after the third robbery.

Vince – Oh, yes... I didn't think you'd actually do it.

Diana – I thought someone had stolen it. I suppose I was right.

Peter – I borrowed it when I came to see you at work last week.

Diana – So that's why you paid me that unexpected visit. It wasn't like you.

Vince – Peter, come on. You're not seriously going to shoot us?

Peter – Not if I can help it. But I can't let the world be destroyed by this discovery.

Vince – What are you, the Messiah now? Promising everyone eternal life?

Peter – And he didn't keep that promise, did he?

Diana – Everyone calm down. We're all getting carried away.

Peter – Enough. I know what you two are after. How long has this been going on?

Diana – Five years.

Vince – Did you really have to tell him that?

Diana – Not continuously, I assure you.

Vince – Careful with that. Guns can go off. You're not exactly experienced.

Peter – Stay where you are and no one will get hurt. Now get out, both of you. Isn't that what you wanted? I'm setting you free. Go and be happy together for the rest of your lives. You have my blessing. And my last rites...

Diana – You can't leave things like this, Peter!

Peter – Why not? What are you offering instead? The three of us living together?

Diana – But you'll be all alone, darling. Forever.

Peter – You forgot our wedding anniversary, and now you want us married for eternity?

Diana – Listen, there's something I haven't told you.

Peter – What now?

Diana – I'm pregnant.

Peter – Is it mine?

Diana – Yes. I'm absolutely sure.

Vince – Wonderful... You told me just now that...

Peter – So I'm going to be a father?

Peter is so surprised that he stumbles and drops the gun. Vince picks it up and points it at him.

Vince – Enough games. Tell us where the serum is.

Peter – All right. But there's something I haven't told you either.

Vince – What now?

Peter – I've already taken a dose.

Diana – One dose?

Peter – There's only enough for one more.

Vince – You bastard.

Diana – What if he's saying that to divide us?

Vince aims the revolver at her.

Vince – Well, it's working...

Diana – You can't do this, Vince! Remember, I'm carrying your child!

Vince – This child changes fathers every five minutes. Do you even know who the father is? I've never wanted children anyway. Now where's the serum? Where's this hiding place nobody can find?

Peter – In one of the coffee capsules. In the basket.

Vince – You're kidding me.

Peter – No.

Vince – Be warned. Immortal doesn't necessarily mean bulletproof.

Peter – Who knows... The rat survived arsenic...

Vince approaches the basket.

Vince – Which one?

Peter – The fair-trade one.

Vince – How do I know you're not lying?

Peter – What have you got to lose? Worst case, you enjoy a good cup of coffee and support the people who grew it.

Vince puts the capsule in the machine and starts it.

Vince – For your sake, I hope you're telling the truth.

Peter – You'll know in about fifty years.

The coffee brews.

Vince – I can tell you now. I've always hated you.

Peter – You mean you've always been jealous of me. That's why you wanted Diana, wasn't it?

Vince – You were always top of the class. Always the idealist.

Peter – And yet I discovered the secret of eternal youth...

Vince – Yes, but you could never give her a child.

Peter – Who knows?

Vince – Well, there's no point letting good coffee go cold...

Vince is about to drink.

Diana – Please, leave me some! You said you loved me!

Vince – That was before. Now, the nectar of the gods is mine.

He carelessly puts down the gun to pick up the cup. Diana seizes the gun and points it at him.

Diana – Put that cup down, or your life will be even shorter than you expected!

Vince cautiously puts the cup down.

Vince – Okay... But be careful with that...

Diana – Move away.

Diana moves towards the cup. Vince tries to get past her.

Vince – You wouldn't shoot the father of your child!

She shoots at point-blank range. He collapses.

Peter – What have you done?

Diana – I warned him. It was him or me.

She puts the revolver down and drinks the cup eagerly.

Peter – Well, here we are. Together again. Until death do us part. And since we're immortal...

Diana – This potion tastes bitter.

Peter – It's medicine.

Diana – How long before it works?

Peter – About ten minutes.

Diana – So that's it? We're both immortal?

Peter – Just like our love.

Diana – I really did love you, you know. At first. But after a while I got bored. If we'd had a child, perhaps...

Peter – What a pity. You don't love me any more, we're married forever, and we can't even have a child.

Diana – I'm already pregnant.

Peter – And when the child grows up, what will you say? That you killed its father?

Diana – I don't have to keep the baby.

Peter – Fine.

Diana – And we're not obligated to stay together either.

Peter – Immortality creates a bond, you know. Why do you think the gods in the old myths kept to themselves?

Diana – They did sometimes come down to mingle with ordinary mortals.

Peter – At first, perhaps. But in a hundred thousand years? In three hundred million? When humanity has disappeared or evolved into something else, you and I will be the only two of our kind. Forever.

Diana – Like Adam and Eve. Forever...

Peter – Except our paradise might be an eternal hell.

Diana *(grimacing)* – I'm not feeling very well.

Peter – That's normal. There are always side effects. And this is still experimental.

Diana – But you survived, didn't you?

Peter – Yes...

Diana – Do you think I'll go to prison for shooting Vince?

Peter – What have you got to lose? Even with a life sentence, you'd get out eventually. The guards would die before you.

Diana – You're right.

Diana sneezes.

Peter – Bless you...

Diana – That's the first cold I've ever had.

Peter – Immortality doesn't seem to agree with you.

Diana – Now you can get back to your cold vaccine.

Peter – I never stopped working on it.

Diana – What?

Peter – You didn't really believe that nonsense about eternal youth, did you?

Diana – I feel terrible...

Peter – I'm not surprised. You've just swallowed the arsenic you set out for Gloria.

Diana – No...

Peter – I'm afraid eternal life is off the menu. Eternal rest, on the other hand... if your conscience lets you rest.

Diana – What?

Peter – I haven't discovered anything, Diana. I'll die one day, just like everyone else. But my revenge has worked better than I ever imagined.

Diana – So you knew about Vince and me?

Peter – Did you really think I was that stupid?

Diana – You'll spend the rest of your life in prison. That'll be my revenge.

Peter – What can I say? Life is a comedy that never ends well.

Diana – Tell me this isn't happening. You poisoned me? Your own wife?

Peter – You've been cheating on me for five years.

Diana – At least you'll get life.

Peter – Not necessarily.

Diana – And how exactly will you get away with it?

Peter – I'll tell them what happened. It's a very romantic story. A woman shoots her lover, then takes poison herself.

Diana – You think the police will believe that?

Peter – Your fingerprints are on the gun. It came from your pharmacy. And you took the arsenic from the pharmacy yourself...

Diana – You're the devil himself!

Peter – Well, if I can't be a god...

Diana – You're a useless scientist, too. I was right about you all along. You haven't discovered a thing, not even a cure for the common cold!

Vince gives a final convulsive twitch.

Peter – Oh... Looks as though the lab will be needing a new director. Vince wanted to fire me, and now I'll take his job. The irony...

Diana sneezes.

Peter – Bless you...

Diana – Thank you.

Diana collapses.

Peter – Well, that's that. *(To the rat in its cage)* You see, Gloria? Love stories, like stage comedies, don't always have happy endings. *(He puts on his coat.)* Be good until I get back. I'll leave your cage open, and there are sandwiches in the kitchen if I'm gone for a while... I'm off to tell the police about this tragic love affair. That should satisfy them. *(He heads for the door.)* And if I do end up with a life sentence, you'll come to prison with me, won't you? After all, you're used to living in a cage.

He goes out. Vince tries to get up. So does Diana. Both collapse again.

Blackout

The End

About the author

Born in 1955 in Auvers-sur-Oise (France), Jean-Pierre Martinez first took to the stage as a drummer in several rock bands before becoming a semiologist in advertising. He then worked as a television screenwriter before returning to the stage as a playwright. He has written around a hundred scripts for television and 123 plays, some of which have become classics (*Friday the 13th, Strip Poker*). His plays have been performed in more than 100 countries and translated into around 50 languages.

Amateur and professional theatre groups looking for plays to perform can download Jean-Pierre Martinez's plays for free from his websites :

https://jeanpierremartinez.net/

https://comediatheque.net/

However, performance rights, which constitute fair compensation for the author's work, are a legal obligation. Whether you are an amateur or a professional, you must request authorization to perform the play and pay the corresponding royalties for the production.

Jean-Pierre Martinez is represented by the Society of Dramatic Authors and Composers (SACD).

To get in touch with Jean-Pierre Martinez and request authorization to perform one of his works, please use the contact form on his websites.

Jean-Pierre Martinez recently returned to music, writing original songs inspired by his poems and plays.

With **Jean-Pierre Martinez Music**, he extends that creative universe through original songs: short stories in musical form, humorous or melancholy, in which each song sometimes becomes a miniature theatrical scene.

https://jeanpierremartinezmusic.com/

Other plays by the same author translated in English:

Monologues

Happy Dogs
Like a fish in the air
Short Stories

Comedies for 2

A Thwarted Vocation
EuroStar
Heads and Tails
Him and Her
Is there a pilot in the audience?
Last chance encounter
New Year's Eve at the Morgue
Not even dead
Pentimento
Preliminaries
Running on empty
Russian Roulette at the Kremlin
The Costa Mucho Castaways
The Dressing Gown
The Joker
The Rope
The Window across the courtyard

Comedies for 3

A brief moment of eternity
A simple business dinner
An innocent little murder
Cards on the Table
Cheaters
Crash Zone
Fragile, Handle with care
Friday the 13th
Horizons
Ménage à trois
One small step for a woman, one giant leap backward for Mankind
The Ways of Chance

Comedies for 4

A Cuckoo's nest
A hell of a night
A Skeleton in the Closet
Back to stage
Bed and Breakfast
Casket for two
Crisis and Punishment
Déjà vu
Family Portrait
Family Tree
Four stars
Friday the 13th
Gay friendly
Hangover
Happy Hour
How to get rid of your best friends
Is there a critic in the audience?
Is there an author in the audience?
Just a moment before the end of the world
Lovestruck at Swindlemore Hall
One marriage out of two
Perfect In-laws
Quarantine
Requiem for a Stradivarius
Strip Poker
Surviving Mankind
The Deal
The Fishbowl
The Perfect Son-in-Law
The Pyramids
The Smell of Money
The Tourists
The Worst Best Man Ever

Comedies for 5 to 6

All's well that starts badly
Christmas Eve at the Police Station
Crisis and Punishment
Critical but Stable
Dead End Boulevard
In lieu of flowers...
King of Fools
The Castaways of New Year's Eve
The President's Draw

Comedies for 7 or more

At the bar counter
Backstage Comedy
Blue Flamingos
Check to the Kings
Christmas Eve at the Police Station
False exit
In flagrante delirium
Just like a Christmas movie
Miracle at Saint Mary Juana Abbey
Music does not always soothe the savage beasts
Neighbours' Day
Nicotine
Of Vegetables and Books
Offside
Open Hearts
Reality Show
Save our Savings
Special Dedication
Stories and Prehistories
Such a lovely village
The House of Our Dreams
The Jackpot
The Performance is not cancelled
The Most Beautiful Village in France
The Worst Village in England
Welcome aboard!
White Coats, Dark Humour

Collection of sketches

Apocalypse
Backstage Bits
Blackouts
Don't panic!
Dramedies
Enough is Enough
Ethan and Eve
Every Colour under the Sun
For real and for fun
Funny Stories
Him and Her
Killer Sketches
Lockdown Shorts
Lost time Chronicles
Memoirs of a Suitcase
No Sense Off Limits
Now and then
Of Animals and Men
Open Hearts
Open Letters
Park Bench Shorts

All of Jean-Pierre Martinez's plays can be downloaded free of charge from his websites:

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