

Lucia Eniu
Paper Kingdoms or The Travels of Marc Lemonde

Preface

We know that a book for children - a good one, a real one, not one that serves as a manual for educators and ideologists - is above all intended for the child in each of us. Otherwise it would never reach its target: the genius human sensibility, the one that opens up to the world with the wonder of the first years of life - that is, the first ages of humanity. Without this renewal, which is the very vocation of children's books, the humanity in us would succumb.

This book is a marvel in itself. Not only does it fulfill its vocation, since it awakens in us the child reader, in all simplicity, but it does so in a subtle synchronicity of the author, his character, Marc Lemonde, and the reader. Thus, the writer, who reveals himself at the beginning of the book and closes it at the end - while allowing himself to be challenged from time to time throughout the reading process - creates his character within his world of writing, like an alter-ego, to the point of entrusting to him, to this child whom he brings to the discovery of the "paper realms", the task of illustrating himself the book he is reading, with his own drawings...

This reveals to us, above all, the author's double talent: that of a writer and a graphic artist. But these children's drawings also take us into the intimacy of a fascinating creation, as second-degree readers - since the implicit, first-degree reader of these stories is the character himself, insofar as he is both the actor and the narrator: it is through his eyes that we read his stories.

These "paper kingdoms" that Lucia Eniu introduces us to are playful (*The Kingdom of the Chess Player*, *The Kingdom of the Wanderer*), funny (*The Kingdom of the Tree*, *The Kingdom of Laughter*, *The Kingdom of the Emoticons*), poetic (*The Kingdom of the Butterflies*, *The Kingdom of the Eye*), mythical (*The Kingdom of Legends*), aesthetic (*The Kingdom of the Mirrors*, *The Kingdom of the Puppets*), and falsely moralistic: the middle ground is not necessarily happiness (*The Kingdom of Balance*), misfortune can smile ("I wish you good sadness and may desolation be with you! "), and humanist utopia is, alas, certainly not for today (*The Kingdom of Tolerance*).

Dana Shishmanian

I created Marc Lemonde one summer night, when the landscape around my house seemed to float in the whitish light of a paper moon. A moon drawn by a left-handed child, distracted and smiling. I imagined him at once and his big black eyes opened on me. Sparkling paper eyes. I offered him a small, bewitching stick and, taking it in my trembling hands, I deposited it at the Gates of the Chess Player's Kingdom. And I gave him a slightly high-pitched, but soft and polite voice. A paper voice.

The Kingdom of the Chess Player

- Mister! Hey! Sir! Step aside! A little to the right! Three spaces! Yes! That's it!

(He runs towards me or hops around like a spoilt little child, waddling a toy horse in his arms, almost as big as he is).

- Here! (he sighs, putting it on the

floor, in the white box number...)

- And now, dear Sir, to the left, please. Ah, how nice you are! Did you fall from the moon? I haven't noticed you among my players yet (he says, showing me his kings, queens and pawns very proudly in their black and white squares).

- Let us say that I have made a stopover in your Kingdom. My name is Marc Lemonde. I am a Traveller.

- A Traveller? Pleased to meet you, sir. I

am the Chess Player.

- Is this... a job?

- It's... me. I am what I am. It's all I know. And I play.

- Night and day?

- Night and day?! What a strange question!

What is night? What is day?

(I would have liked to reply, to say, at least, "what ignorance!", but the Player took me by the hand and dragged me to another square, black this time).

- Let us rest for a moment. Her Majesty the Queen will arrive and I must pay my respects.

- But... it is you who will carry her to her hut!

- Of course we will! That's the game! That's life!

(he said, taking out a small mirror from his pocket). I look good, don't I? No doubt Her Majesty the Queen will admire my appearance, my outfit! (he sighed, keeping his pose).

- Do me the pleasure of participating in the ceremony! (he said, turning back to me, his eyes shining).
- I would love to participate, but unfortunately...
- Do you want to miss the royal ceremony? Too bad! The adventure is here, in front of us! The Queen could be kidnapped! She may need our help! What a pity! But... since you are leaving us, allow me, dear Mr. Traveller, to make you a small donation.
- (And as he said this, he took out a small note from his pocket and, slipping it into my hand, took his leave, shouting):
- I'll leave you to it! The oboes will announce

the Queen's arrival. Bon voyage, Sir!

(And he left me in the middle of a vastness of lonely black-white squares. In the distance, some pawns were bored to death).

As for me, before I leave this world

playful, I opened the ticket:

"I play, I hop, therefore I exist. Because the important thing is to go, to walk, even if you don't always get where you want. The important thing is to play.

The Kingdom of the Vagabond

(Lights, small shadows, colours, perfect silence, an almost banal setting).

- Good morning, sir. (I'm trying to be polite, because as far as I can see he's the only inhabitant of this little green kingdom).
- Hi! (he replies, his strangely white little hands resting on a blue stick. He smokes a pretty little red pipe and exclaims with a laugh) :
- What a strange person!

(I look around. Nobody... He resumes his laughter).

- Oh, how funny you are with your strange clothes and your good-natured look!
- My name is Marc Lemonde.
- The Vagabond at your service! (he answers in a laughing voice, taking out his hat. And there he is, offering me a wide curtsy, Louis XIV style).
- Glad to know you, Mr. Vagabond. Do you live alone? (He starts laughing again. That's right, I do, a cheerful wanderer).
- Alone? And my hat? What about it? And my stick? And my loitering look? Don't I look good?

(And here he is, posing with one hand on his hip and looking down on him. He is also a very proud wanderer).

- And what do you do in everyday life, with your hat, your stick and your air of loafing?

- Ah ! I'm suffocating ! Help me ! Help me ! What am I doing? What am I doing ? But I'm OVERWHELMING! It's a very noble job! I stroll around all day, I laugh a lot, I eat in the street, I sleep in the street, I dance in the street, I live in the street, like all vagabonds.

- And... are you happy?

- Are you joking? If I'm happy... But why would I be sad? This is all I want to do in life. It's all I like to do. I work, you know? In my own way. And I, too, have a meaning in this world. I intrigue, I sadden and I enliven. You think that's not much? Do you? Tell me!

(And, as my answer stubbornly remained in my mouth, he took his hat and stick and, while offering me another curtsy, this time more ample, more majestic, he added, full of importance):

- My apologies, my dear Marc Lemonde. I must leave as soon as possible. In a few hours, at the other end of my kingdom (how far away it is! it's three or four metres in all!) there will be the Conference of Little Lonely Wanderers of which I am the President (another great reverence!) and I must prepare my speech on "The Wandering Mind - Principles and Characteristics".

(And as he says this, he offers me - oh, God of politeness! - another curtsy of royal magnificence and leaves me whistling and hopping, a funny little Tramp in a lonely little world, and I want to scream, cry and laugh at the same time. How good it is to be able to be self-sufficient, to be happy in one's solitude, to imagine a meaning in one's life!)

The Butterfly Kingdom

The little paper moon had been adorned with a black silk veil as Mark was about to cross the threshold of a new land. The stars, too, tired of bursting without respite, had taken a short break behind a curtain of clouds.

At first Marc felt a terrible draught. He felt as if he were in a whirlpool. A small, solitary sound rubbed his ears: a frail, timid flapping of wings. Then another. And another. And as he moved further into the darkness, the wingbeats multiplied, the sounds became more refined, more refined, and suddenly music was born: strange, sidereal, soothing music.

With his nose in the air, breathing in an odour whose source he could not guess, Marc suddenly felt himself being knocked over in the tall grass. A sharp pain paralysed his little body. He fainted.

When he came to, the sun was greeting him with a friendly wink. His body was heavy and he could barely stand up. A perfect silence reigned over this new unknown world. Mark opened his eyes. In front of him, a majestic statue stood white, cold, immense, dazzling in the bright morning light. It was a marble

butterfly whose wings, dotted with small butterflies in relief, seemed to float in the soft air. A high-pitched cry escaped from the little paper body. The landscape took her breath away. An unparalleled sweetness spread through the air.

Flowers. Lots of flowers. A flowery world, where soft, refined colours mingled with the boldest touches. An exquisite blue in the heart of the cornflowers spread before the sandy pink of a bouquet of peonies. Giant poppies competed with white chrysanthemums, whose petals looked like a knot of dancing snakes. Roses with small golden yellow flowers clung to the rocks dotted with petunias whose black velvet seemed unreal. Snowdrops leaned indiscreetly towards delicate forget-me-nots and lilacs spread their bewitching perfume over the valley. A little further on, there was a hill clothed in violets, and in front of her, another one dotted with daisies.

Marc leaned over to a hollyhock, to inhale its scent. Suddenly, an explosion of colours followed by a torrent of petals succeeded in destroying the silence of this little Edenic corner. Butterflies of all kinds. Of all colours. Armies of butterflies. Dwarf butterflies danced in the air among the gigantic butterflies. A world of butterflies. And in their midst, frail and frightened, Marc, with his paper heart beating very fast.

"The Butterfly Kingdom," he whispered in astonishment.

At that moment, the earth around him began to move. The gardens and hills became like a stormy sea. Flowery waves floated in the *butterflied* air and it seemed to him that a giant had taken this kingdom in his hands, shaking it like a carpet. Or that ferocious monsters swam beneath this flowery earth. The symphony of the flapping wings also sounded like an evil song.

- Hey! Sir!" shouted Mark, staggering into the tall grass. He was acting funny with his arms in the air. Hey, Sir!" he continued. Help me!

- It's the butterfly effect," I managed to articulate, shaking with laughter. For my paper man looked funny.

- The effect what?!" he said, also shaken by the trembling earth.

- The butterfly effect," I said. When you tried to stroke the flower, the sleeping butterflies began to flap their wings nervously and it was their uncontrollable movement that caused the shaking and everything else.

- What about me? What do I do now?" said Mark in such a high-pitched voice that my laughter started again.

And before I could say anything, my little man was caught in a whirlwind of wings which carried him through the air. A high-pitched cry escaped from the winged monster...

Lying in the tall grass at the gateway to the Butterfly Kingdom, Mark sighed like a spoiled child. A little further on, in the perfect garden, silence had fallen over the flowers. A few quiet and indifferent butterflies were playing hide and seek.

And in the middle of this flowery paradise, the marble statue smiled enigmatically.

The Tree Kingdom

He was tall, with green hair and bright eyes. I found him, however, very gloomy and in a bad mood. It was because he had lost a few rebellious leaves the day before, he told me later. And now, sitting in front of the trembling green pile, he spoke to them like a master prophet:

"Our Majesty, the Great Tree, informs you that as a result of your uncontrollable action, you have lost your *leafy* rights. You will never again know the splendours of the heights, except those that are temporary, if Mr. Wind does you the honour of carrying you, for a few moments, on his wings. Wicked! Ungrateful! You have lost the right to earn your daily absinthe. Your fate from now on? Oh, the poor! Nothing but loitering, drought, rot, oblivion! Nothing else!"

And as he said this, he closed his eyes and with a deafening noise stood up in all his imperial splendour. Oh, how tall he was! Oh, the lovely bright green of his bushy hair!

- Good morning, Your Majesty!" I whispered,

moved. For, in the face of such majesty...

- Hello, my little count!" he answered quickly, with his majestic air.

- Count?" I exclaimed, dazzled. I am not a count. My name is Marc Lemonde.

- Count is the title I give (how generous! I thought) to all those who are passing through my green empire and come to greet me. But," he added, "you certainly, certainly look like a real count. Count Marc Lemonde. And, my goodness, that sounds good!

I fixed my most intense gaze on him and closed my eyes, for a few moments, to inscribe his image, as faithful as possible, and to be able, one day, to transpose it in the album of my travels.

- Hopscotch? Hide and seek? Jumping jacks?

- What?! I... mean... sorry?

- I was asking... if... well... would you... play... with me...?

- Playing?! You like... playing? But you... Your Majesty... so serious... so...

- I love it! I love the game! And his bark was adorned with a beautiful tree smile. How funny he was! A giant with the heart of a child! A child hidden in a huge stream of greenery!

- Let us play, my dear Count! Let's play "to the happiness of being together"!

The Kingdom of Legends

"Once upon a time, in the immemorial past, there was a very polite and smiling little man who always held a small bewitching stick in his hand and who loved to travel. He had black eyes..."

- Like me," said our Mark, quite surprised to see a book being born before his eyes.

He closed it, put it at his feet and looked in wonder at the landscape before him. He felt very small, an ant, a small dot in the immense field that spread out at his feet. A field of books. Books of all kinds, scattered all around him, baby books, barely written, books in the process of being born (Marc was discovering, dazzled, how the pages were filling up with words and images), old books with faded covers, yellowed leaves, whose wrinkles were intertwined between the lines. Sitting among them, Marc discovered that, from all these thousands of words, words were coming out that were rising in the wind, speaking, shouting, whispering, according to propriety. They told in their own way. Their voices mingled in the old-fashioned air. A sun was smiling over the book field. A beautiful paper sun.

Enveloped in a cloud of golden dust, the rider stopped abruptly, pulling the head of his restive little horse towards the stirrup. He took off his large blue bonnet. Marc saw the smiling face of a girl with black frizzy hair. Her skin was also as black as ebony. She held out a delicate hand to him.

- Mira," she said, simply.

- Marc," he sighed, in a shy voice. How beautiful she was!

- You're just passing through, I think," she said. Let me guess: you're the new secretary to His Majesty the Supreme Writer, right? We weren't expecting you today.

- Oh, no... I... I'm not... a secretary," he stammered, confused. I'm just passing through. In other words, I'm just a traveller," he said hoarsely.

- A traveller! Ah, good! I didn't expect it. Is that a job? What exactly do you do?

- I travel, I admire, I observe... That's all.

- My goodness! But it must be very interesting! Travelling, admiring, observing! I have never travelled. I have never left the Kingdom.

- What Kingdom?

- This one. The Book Kingdom. Or, if you like, the Kingdom of tales and legends.

- And... His Majesty...

- ...The Supreme Writer. He's my father. He's always busy. Too busy, unfortunately," she sighed. He writes non-stop, from morning to night. I rarely see him.

- So you are...

- Princess Mira. Yes," she said in a monotone voice. A princess. That's it. That doesn't mean I like to wear pretty lace dresses and curtsy and go to all sorts of boring parties. That's my mother's job. Queen Libra. She's very good at it, by the way. As for me, I like freedom. Movement. The changes. This morning, I simply offered to give souvenirs. So I took a box, put some captions in it and... here I am! Would you like some?

- Thank you," Mark stammered, flushed. He reached into the small chest, took out a book and began to leaf through it.

- Oh, the beautiful pictures!" he exclaimed, raising his little paper head. But Mira had disappeared. In the distance, somewhere in the vast expanse of books, Mark heard her small, happy voice echo:
 "Legends to remember! Legends as memories!"
 Mark sat down on a large stone book and began to read.

The Legend of the Seasons

*"I like spring dressed in pink,
 I like the sunny summer,
 For me, it's a bit of a gloomy autumn.
 What about you? Winter all snowed in."
 Once upon a time, a long time ago, when time flowed without measure, there was a very rich man somewhere on this earth, whose name was An and who had four girls. His wife had died long ago and he took care of their education all by himself.
 Although they were sisters, the girls hated each other. But at the same time, each one loved her father very much and wanted to be his favourite. The old man An, who, as a good father, loved all four of them, was a very wise man who dreamed of a quiet life. He would have liked them to love each other and to make peace. But it was in vain. Their discord never ceased. Summer, who loved the big sun and the drizzle, the greenery and the fertile fields, hated Autumn, a girl with rust-coloured hair, a little morose and quarrelsome, who preferred rain with big black clouds and bad weather, the sweetness of the fruits and the faded leaf. Winter, who loved snow and snowstorms, frost and hail, did not like her sister, the pretty Spring, a tall, supple and cheerful girl who loved barely grown grass, spindly flowers, pale sunshine and rain.
 The old man always tried to offer them reconciliation, telling them that all their pleasures were useful and welcome, each in its own time, but that there would be nothing sadder than an eternal great sun or an incessant torrential rain, or an*

eternal snowstorm or an endless great frost. But the girls seemed deaf to these words. Their argument continued in this way, until one fine day, tired of all their bad words and complaints, the old man damned them thus:

"May you never be together again! May you follow one another in an eternal circle and meet only for a moment, one driving out the other, and so on and so on, ad infinitum! And may I, myself eternal, remind you of this curse again and again!"

And the old man gave up his soul, grumbling terribly. His daughters began to pity him, but when they were about to wash him, he came to. He seemed younger, his face firm, with a strange gleam in his eyes and full of new strength.

Before the astonished eyes of his daughters, he said in a resounding voice:

"The curse has been fulfilled! I shall die and be reborn, from youth to old age. And you, despicable daughters, you who did not know how to listen to the voice of a father who loved you, submit! Spring, stay! I will start with you, because you are rebirth, hope, budding, youth and optimism. You will have to struggle a little with your sister Winter, who will not give in too easily, despite all my efforts at conviction.

You, the others, disappear! You will reappear later, each in its own time. And remember this: each of you is useful to nature, to the Earth and its inhabitants. And though you may never succeed in loving each other, people will love you all. May the circle that is about to begin spinning never stop!

And the circle began to turn. And summer followed spring, autumn followed summer, winter followed autumn, spring followed winter...

- How beautiful is this legend!

Marc, full of joy.

And as he said this, he began to read the second legend:

The legend of the sunflower

"Turn, turn, Sunflower! The sun,

What a wonder! Its rays,

What beautiful gifts!

I'm flying away... How funny!

Turn, Sunflower!"

Once upon a time there was a young girl called Fleur. Her parents gave her this name because, from her earliest days, she charmed everyone with her unparalleled beauty. As time went by, she became more and more beautiful. No one could remain indifferent to her appearance. She was beautiful, but at the same time she was wise, graceful, full of joy, sociable and intelligent. Many a time, as they crossed the country, passers-by stopped at her door, trying to catch

a glimpse of her and listen to her. For Fleur had a sweet, crystalline voice and sang like a goddess. In a word, she was wonderful. But - because there is always a "but" that disturbs the calm and joyful life of humans - an event and its consequences turned this family's happiness into misfortune. One beautiful night, Fleur dreamed that a young man dressed in a fiery cloak had approached her and whispered softly:

"You will be mine forever, my beautiful Flower. Then, before disappearing, he kissed her forehead.

Since then Fleur had changed, she had become sad and melancholy. She spent her days alone, hidden from the eyes of strangers, sometimes watching for someone from her window: it seemed to her that far, far away, high up, a young man was waving to her. And she felt a burning on her forehead.

In the meantime, the matchmakers started to parade in front of Fleur's house. There were young men from all over who wanted to know her, to talk to her. But Fleur could only see the Sun. Yes, the young man in her dream was the Sun, she said dreamily, and her mother wept with grief. Had Fleur gone mad? The girl, her once sweet daughter, was now all alone, sighing incessantly. She cried for no reason, her eyes were ever more gloomy, and melancholy was gradually taking over. In vain the old women made incantations for her. Nothing soothed her suffering.

No one knew anything more about his second dream. No one ever knew if the strange young man had appeared again. One morning, when she entered Fleur's room, her mother stopped dead in her tracks: Fleur was lying in bed, looking as if she had wanted to kiss someone. She was dead.

The suffering of the parents knew no bounds. The people had great difficulty in convincing them to leave the cemetery. They went there day and night and cried and begged the sky. But heaven remained silent, as always.

One morning, they discovered a small plant on the grave that had barely grown.

It had grown randomly. A few weeks later, it bloomed. A small yellow flower.

One day they found it open. Big and yellow, like Fleur's hair, and so beautiful!

Everyone was amazed when they saw that when the sun came out, the flower turned its big blonde head towards it. As the sun disappeared, it turned and turned without respite. At dusk, it lowered its head, sad. People said that the flower was a sign that God, touched by the suffering of both parents, was sending them a flower that reminded them of Fleur. And because she loved the sun so much, because she always turned her face towards it, she was given the name Sunflower.

Towards autumn, the sunflower bore fruit: hundreds of seeds appeared in its "belly", edible seeds from which a good, very fine oil was extracted. Then people thought of Fleur's desire to be useful. These seeds were the fruit of her kindness and love for her fellow human beings. Since then, the sunflower has been loved

and appreciated wherever the climate has allowed it to grow. And its legend has come down to us through the centuries.

Sighing, with a sad look on his face, Mark prepared to read the third legend. It was...

The legend of dreams

Dream... what happiness! I welcome your return with the thousands of voices of my thousands of nocturnal existences!

In the beginning of the world people slept deeply, without dreaming. Why did they do this? Because, quite simply, dreams did not yet exist. Sleep was a fat man, very old, dull, capricious, unimaginative.

Somewhere on earth, in those distant days, there was a beautiful, majestic and mysterious high mountain, whose bluish glow amazed humans. No, it was not a mirage. The mountain was light blue, but here and there there were darker spots. No one knew about this, but the old men said that the mountain was covered with large flowers that looked like cups painted in various shades of blue. They were said to have a very strong, intoxicating scent. No one had dared to get too close to them, just to look or to pick one. It was passed down from father to son, the fear and the prediction that whoever dared to touch or tread on even one flower would meet a terrible end and that for all the others, a terrible misfortune would befall them.

What kind of misfortune? No one talked about it. Fear kept them all away from the mountain. Fear and also a feeling of reverence for this god who, before their mortal eyes, appeared in the form of a mountain dotted with unreal blue flowers. But one night - one could not say when or how - a shepherd from a distant country stopped briefly at the foot of the mountain. He saw the flowers and was ecstatic. Not knowing their mystery, he was not afraid of them and came closer and closer. The brilliance of the flowers rivalled the splendour of the stars. For they shone magically in the night. They seemed to be cups full of blue light and the shepherd could not resist the temptation to pick one.

Then there was a terrible roar that seemed to come from the depths of the earth and, very loudly, louder and louder, it invaded the sky and everything began to spin and, in this crazy whirlwind, the shepherd fell as if struck by lightning. In front of their doors, the frightened men could see the mountain starting to sway and suddenly a very, very loud explosion dazzled them...

At dawn, an extremely deep chasm had replaced the mountain and from its bowels blue flames rose. At night they turned into birds - big blue birds - and people were carried on their wings to unknown lands. We don't know why they were called dreams. They help us, at night, to escape from the real world and enter secret places, where anyone can become a king or a slave, a god or a beggar. Every night, thanks to them, we know new worlds, new experiences and

we could say, why not, that dreams offer us new existences, unknown during the day, but so real, once the night comes.

Close your eyes, my little one, close them slowly... The blue bird will come...

- Oh," sighed Mark. I want to get some sleep too. I feel very tired. Will the blue bird come?

The Eye Kingdom

One eye. That's all I saw, Mr. Writer. That's all I saw, Mr. Writer. An immense eye, made up of thousands of tiny eyes. At first, one felt uncomfortable in all this industry of looks. All those black, violet, green, red, grey-blue eyes that were constantly watching me, it was too much.

- Frozen? Frozen? I asked my little paper man.

- No, on the contrary, he replied. Flashing, full of warmth, more human than human even. And smiling. And singers.

- Singers ?

- Yes, it was. Around me there was a strange symphony, but so comforting! It was the music of the eyes.

- But... the eyes... are for looking,

to see.

- You are talking about your own eyes, which you use to spy, to discover. They only allow you to see a limited universe, unfortunately. A limited, square, ordered universe. Banal. Whereas those other eyes... I don't know how to explain it to you, but they penetrated me, invaded me, caressed my soul. And that heavenly music that spread such happiness...

I even managed to communicate with them, in a way. Their music was flooding me, transmitting their friendship. A stream of friendship that flowed through my veins. They whispered in my ear: "Welcome, welcome! If you like our Kingdom, if you like us, welcome! Stay here! But, if you want to leave, let our house be for you an oasis of peace and rest. This is as accurate a translation of their music as possible.

When I finally decided to leave, they started to cry like lost children and I almost swam in a river of tears. They were short of visitors, poor things!

My greatest pleasure was to have been able to carry their strange and seductive music in a little eye which, at departure time, slipped gently into my hand.

I left the Eye Kingdom I regretted so much And one day I promised to return

The Laughing Kingdom

- Ha, ha, ha! Hi, hi, hi! Ho, ho, ho! I... ha, ha! I was... hi, hiii... I was all alone in a little valley and... hii... hi, hi... I picked a little flower... there it was... ho, hooo... and the smell of it... hi, hiii... All around me... ha, haa, ha, ha... we were laughing... hi, hi, hiii... we were laughing, what! Ha, ha! Hi, hi, hiii....

And Marc Lemonde continued to laugh and laugh, his eyes full of tears. I knew then, without a doubt, that he had visited the Kingdom of Laughter. And in his big black eyes I saw Laughter: thousands of smiling mouths. But what I cannot convey to you in writing is their sound, the music of those thousand nuanced laughs and the desire they gave to laugh endlessly.

And I... ha, ha... I hi, hi... I started to laugh too... hi, hi... in all shades... ha, ha, ha... in all possible shades... hi, hiii... and impossible ones and ho, ho, ho... at the end... ha, ha... when I almost died of laughter - how true that expression is! - I felt so appeased, so emptied of all sadness, all bitterness, all evil! The whole universe seemed like a gigantic laughing machine. One had the impression that all the evil in the world had been driven away. An air of inexplicable happiness reigned everywhere in the air. The paper sky was also laughing with all its teeth.

- Ha, ha, ha! Life is beautiful," shouted Marc, "if only for that great laugh that does us so much good! Hi, hi... How funny I am, with this good laugh that floods me! This is the first time I feel so relaxed, so serene, so calm, so happy! I wish there were, not only in this paper world, but in all possible worlds, laughter sessions, laughter classes, laughter therapies, laughter treatises, that laughter was compulsory in schools, that there was also a Church of Laughter, a Law of Laughter and that those who are mean, dull, bad-tempered, egotistical or aloof were punished! Hiii... hiii...

- But... hi, hi... you... ha, ha... you're crying... ho, ho... ha... ha... you're crying... well... hi, hi, hiii...

- I... hi... I... ho... I cry with laughter... ha,

ha... hi, hiii...

Above us, the stars also laughed in thousands of shades. And on the sleeping dune of the Kingdom of Laughter, it snowed with their tears of laughter. The symphony of crying-laughter invaded the night.

The Kingdom of Mirrors

- Thousands of mirrors?

- Thousands? Maybe. But the important thing is that everything was so beautiful, so impressive, that I almost stayed there forever. There were mirrors on the floor, a shimmering carpet...

- A lake of mirrors?

- Ah, no, that would have been too banal. For what gave it its fascinating, exquisite appearance was a labyrinth of mirrors gently flying, spinning, waltzing

in the icy air. How can I describe to you my amazement, all that I felt looking at myself, discovering and devouring myself in all my facets, feeling that in myself there were thousands of Marks, one more complex than the other? I got lost and found myself several times. For a few moments, I became the prisoner of my image, but far from becoming a narcissistic being, dying of passion for himself, I managed to break my soul into pieces, to be able to offer it to all those who will one day need a bit of humanity. And Marc emerged from the labyrinth with a sense of triumph and peace.

"Each of us has our own shimmering, deceptive and agonising labyrinth," he declaimed, like a wise old man from the beginning of the world.

I smiled. My paper character had managed to escape from my thoughts. He had his own thoughts, his own questions and doubts. And his wisdom.

The Kingdom of Desolation

- Hey, Mr. Writer! Wake up! It's me, Marc. You can see me, can't you? I imagine him hopping around inside a big ball where it snows endlessly. In spite of the snowflakes, the landscape is frozen, greyish, sleepy. In a word, desolate. Dis - so-lant. And, above all, there's poor Marc, jumping around like a madman, waving his arms.

- Hey! Mr. Writer! Look at me! You may be wondering how I got here. I couldn't tell you. But the air is desolate. The landscape is also uniquely sad. And I feel like crying. - But of course you want to cry. Because, from what I can see, you have fallen into the Kingdom of Desolation," shouts a hoarse voice behind him. Mark turns around and sees a short old man wearing clothes too large for his small body and with a beard that reaches down to his knees. He has a sorry look on his face, disheveled hair and shabby shoes... you guessed it, sorry.

- Eric Desolant at your disposal," he said, in his hoarse voice, extending a sad hand towards Mark. My friends just call me Deso.

- Oh, yes, it's a good name for you; it goes well with your sadness.

- The little man answers with an ever sadder voice (it seems as if he is rejoicing by being sad, that his happiness rhymes with sadness). And a beautiful tear escapes from his right eye.

- You are very sad, Mr. Deso," Marc continued. May I ask what happened to you? A misfortune? An accident? The death of a loved one?

- No, no, it's okay. It's all right. We like misfortune. It makes us cry and it's so good to cry!

- But you never smile? A little laugh? A little joke? Never?

- Laughing, smiling? What does it mean? What is a joke?

Marc looks distressed. He feels like crying, which does not escape Deso.

- Well, there you go," he said, sadder than ever, clapping his little hands. There you are.

- How?" exclaims Marc.
- But your sadness. It goes very well with the lines of your face. It's a good quality sadness. My friends would appreciate it, no doubt. You could, if it would please you, move in with us. There is always a sorry home for newcomers.
- Many thanks, Mr. Déso, but I must go. I am a traveller, so I travel. It's my job.
- Oh well! Too bad!
- But... the other inhabitants?
- Ah, the others! They are all, with His Majesty Our Gentle Sadness, in church. It's time for prayer. Our god, Benedick Desolator, offers us his blessing. We will cry, scream, break our clothes, pull our hair. It will be a very, very good day.
- And you express it in this way...
- Our gratitude to our Lord of Desolation, the one who blesses our tears and sorrows. It is he who has given us the gift of this blessed land of desolation.

End-of-the-world bells began to ring in the desolate air.

Deso takes his leave, politely holding out his sad hand.

- Goodbye, Mr Marc. I wish you much sorrow and may desolation be with you, may it accompany you everywhere and always.

And he runs to the other end of the Kingdom, where the bells keep on ringing in the air.

- Hey, Mr. Writer!" shouts Marc towards the paper clouds. Can you hear me? I have fallen into the ocean of desolation. And I want to cry.

Fortunately (what a nice word!), I have my little flower and its smell... hi, hi! ha, ha!...

Poor Mark begins to laugh until he cries, and the music of his joyful laughter manages to cover the bitter tones of the desolate bells. A white bird comes out of its little laughing flower and, taking him on its wings, carries him away from this grey kingdom.

- Hi, hi, hi!" Marc continues in earnest, while, in the lonely ball above him, it snows endlessly...

The Kingdom of Balance

Lying in the tall grass among the wild daisies, Mark felt the caress of a veil on his face. He opened his eyes and took the veil in his hands. A small red veil that went perfectly with the little blue drops of the sky that were slipping through the white daisies. He closed his eyes again, a little disconcerted, and resumed his reverie. A new caress, a new little veil, this time yellow. Marc stood up, reopened his large eyes.

A thick rope, whose ends were not visible, stretched over the flowery meadow. It was dancing in the air, under the feet of an acrobat. Yes, an acrobat who seemed very agile and nice. He seemed to have been born there, on the rope. His movements were so precise that he managed to keep his balance without any problem. He even did little pirouettes, lifting one foot in the air, then the other, with the flexibility of a ballet dancer. He saw Mark and, sitting on the rope as if on a swing, greeted him in a low voice:

- Hey, hi, little man!

- Good morning, sir," said Mark, a little annoyed by the rude greeting.

- Come on, get on the rope. Just hop around a bit and give me your little arm.

- Ha, ha, ha!" said Mark, still more annoyed.

- I think a little balance would do you good.

- A little balance?

- But yes. Since you're passing through the - The Land of Equilibrium, you say? And you're the owner?

- Oh, no, I'm a sort of sub-chief. The supreme leader is our Highness Equilibra.

- A woman?

- But yes, a real woman, well balanced, in whom gentleness and harshness go hand in hand. She is good to the good guys and bad to the bad guys. She always knows how to keep the balance, even in the most difficult situations.

- What about you? Are you never bored, always like this, in perfect balance?
- Ah, no," said the acrobat. That's what I'm here for, after all.

Oh, the poor thing!" sighed Mark, as he walked away. This one will never know the sweetness of the imperfect, but soothing days. It would be very inconvenient and boring to live in a world all perfect and balanced, suspended above the simple and transient happinesses, like those wild daisies I was admiring just now.

The Kingdom of Emoticons

The Kingdom that Mark discovered was in the form of a giant transparent sphere, through which he saw a chaotic network of threads of all colours and sizes, among which small spheres of all colours and sizes were floating. Strange, sidereal music managed to pass through all obstacles and spread outside the giant sphere. In the small spheres, Marc saw strange beings, also spherical in shape: a big round head, big eyes and a big mouth. Two hands and two tiny feet attached to the head completed the strange picture. In one of the spheres a young man was waving his small hands in the air. Marc realised that he was waving at him.

- he heard, suddenly. He looked around. No one was there. But in one of the little spheres the young man was still moving his little arms.

- Hey! There, there, dear sir! Can you hear me? Sir, sir, sir!

Mark brought his face close to the large sphere and smiled.

- Here we are!" said the little young man, smiling. Hello ! You are...

- Marc Lemonde.

- What a nice name! Lemonde. I like it.

My name is Émo Canu

- I'm sorry, but I don't know which country it is, if it's a country.

- It is more than just a country. That would be trite, very trite. It is... the Kingdom of emoticons.

- What?" stammered Marc, dumbfounded.
 - Emoticons, that is us, me and my compatriots.
 - And... you are all like this...? I mean... they look like you...?
- Èmo began to laugh.
- Ha, ha, ha! What a strange question! Of course it is. We are all built on the same mould. Our Kingdom, which is very prosperous, is part of the Planet of the Internauts, located in the Ordo Galaxy. I'm quite well known in the virtual business world, thanks to my sharp mind, but also to my charm. Mark looked at him, astonished. This small, spherical man was really very modest.
 - You've already noticed my ferreting eyes, my benevolent and hoax-like manner and my charming smile.
 - And you live alone?" cut him off.
 - But of course. I don't have any parents anymore, but I have a lot of friends, the best of whom is our president Èmocon. He is a nice character in our landscape, a colossus of virtual politics, who likes to be surrounded by liberal, professional people, a bit crazy, in the good sense of the word, a bit rebellious, but serious and loyal, like me.
 - Oh, the height of modesty!

- Excuse me?" said Èmo Canu.

- I... I think you must be very happy to have such friends.

- Yes, of course, especially since he is always happy to have me in his Moon Palace, the presidential residence. Because, even though I have a colossal fortune, I don't like to stay at home alone. He very often invites me to the Palace, where I spend a lot of time, sometimes I stay for months. In exchange, I give him all sorts of very expensive gifts. And our president likes gifts. When he receives them, he rejoices like a child. He is a playful man, he likes everything that has to do with the spirit. And he loves me very much and supports me in everything I do.

Here, I'll give you an example. It was an afternoon on Wednesday, 10 September 2335.

I arrived at the Palace a little later than expected, because of a malaise. The president found me stranger than usual. My eyes were red, I seemed very absent and a bit nervous.

- What's going on, my dear friend?
- Sometimes...

Before I could finish my sentence, I was shaken by a sort of current. Invisible arms seemed to grip me, lifting me suddenly into the air, and then letting me fall back to the ground, where my body shook, curved, and struggled, making strange sounds like an aged and rusty automaton.

- Oh, my God!" exclaimed the president. Oh, my God!" he continued. He called his guards and ordered them to fetch Dr. Carles. He arrived, marvelled,

examined me, palpated me, observed me and, in a serious, apocalyptic tone, said these few words:

- Oh, my God!

- Is it serious, doctor?" said the president, also imploring this aged deity who had lost his way through the centuries.

- Is it serious?" sighed the doctor. I've never seen anything like it. This could be the most rebellious virus in the entire Ordo Galaxy. Who knows? It's been talked about for the last few centuries, but thought to be a mere myth, a poor avatar of what was called over a thousand years ago, the dreaded Spanish flu. Oh, my God!" he said again. Black clouds already announce, perhaps, a possible terrible end.

- And what do you think should be done?

- You have to go and get the famous Antivirus Hacker

- This strange hacker who thinks he is a superhero? But it's beyond anything I imagined!" said the president, quite dazzled.

- Let me tell you that you are wrong this time, dear Mr. President. He may not be the most honest person on this poor planet, but he is the only one who can save us. And he clapped his hands.

- Good morning, Mr. President," was the sound in the large presidential hall. And Antivirus Hacker appeared in all his splendour, literally. For he was dressed head to toe in gold of the highest quality.

- said the president, instead of answering him.

And Antivirus Hacker, no longer waiting for an invitation, began to examine me. He paused, shook his head and resumed his examination. After an hour, after several times during which the president and Dr. Carles had sighed, in turn, rubbing their hands and crossing themselves in their back and forth, Antivirus Hacker raised his head, took off his 3D glasses and sighed, in turn, declaring:

- It is not a deadly virus! It is a poor virus of the ADWARE family. And the remedy is very simple: The gentleman here, Emo Canu, should give up telescoping for a long period of time and...

- The president and the doctor asked in unison. I remained speechless, without saying anything.

- To be telephoned ! What do you mean? You don't know the term?" said Antivirus, surprised. It's an old term, it's true. There is already talk of replacing it. The Academôticones have proposed, for example, 'infodrogate', but I think that telesnober will resist, anyway. It's nicer. You are, so to speak, dear Mr Canu," he tells me, "a telesnober.

And as he said this, he took my super-smart phone and stuffed it into his pocket.

- This one is going to be locked up for a long time," he said, in an authoritative tone.

- No!" I sighed, really marked by this radical measure.

- Yes, yes, " said the doctor. And you're going to take a rather barbaric medicine, it's true, a little infusion of fresh air, greenery, birdsong, in short, life in the open air. We have very well designed virtual nature programmes.

- Oh, my God!" sighed the president and Dr Carles in unison. But that's prehistory, my dear Hacker," added the latter.

- Oh, my God!" I sighed, in turn.

- I know, I know," sighed Antivirus in solidarity. But we have to take radical measures. Because, for this disease, there is, until now, no other medicine. And then, who knows," he continued, "one fine day, perhaps, we will return to prehistory. Who knows what will happen in the future?

And all of us, at the same time, raised our round eyes to the Great Virtual High, admiring, beyond the artificial sky, the play of the planets and smiling our friendly emoticon smiles. There, said Émo Canu.

- What a funny story!" said Marc, amused.

- Isn't it?" said Émo Canu, in all seriousness. And he opened, with the help of a tiny super-intelligent remote control, several virtual windows that invaded his little sphere, filling it with bucolic landscapes and songs

of birds.

Mark took his leave of him, to admire the other little spheres that dotted the Emoticon Kingdom.

- What a strange Kingdom!" he sighed.

The Kingdom of the Puppets

Marc heard the song as soon as he entered the gates of this strange kingdom. In front of the entrance there were, one on the left, the other on the right, two giant puppets whose strings were lost in the clouds. Someone was operating them with great skill, for the two giants were dancing, swinging, waving and jumping.

*Come, children, young and old,
At the puppet ball, Dance in circles,
Jump, sing,
With your coquettish faces.*

The song flowed softly from the sky, adorned with little clouds in the shape of flowers, floating in the air and spreading among the thousands of... puppets that Marc looked at with his mouth agape. There were all kinds of puppets: string puppets, rod puppets, glove puppets, water puppets, marottes, puppets, dressed in fabulous clothes, in brilliant colours.

- Ah, dear Sir! Come in, come in," he heard in the air. It was a small voice, high-pitched like his own.

The puppets were doing their work, unaware of his presence. There were puppets jumping rope, playing hopscotch, going in circles, imitating automatons, playing hide-and-seek behind large panels with exotic designs. There were those who sat on huge crescent moons, who rolled large neon-coloured circles, who dressed as soldiers, who played the trumpet and the drum and marched in rhythm, who...

- Sir! Sir!" Mark heard again. He looked around. The puppets were still doing their job. Something landed in Mark's hair. He shook his head. It was a small blue feather. More little blue feathers began to waltz through the air. Mark looked up. On one of the branches of a tree that was floating in the air, a small puppet dressed in white was smiling at him. It seemed to Mark that it looked like him in some way.

- Sir! Sir!" shouted the little puppet for the third time.

- Hello!" said Mark, moved. My name is

Marc.

- And my name is Marcine," smiled the puppet, coquettishly.

Come, come, Sir, Dance with us, Turn, turn in circles, Swing! Walk, walk in cadence, Enter the dance!

And suddenly, at the sound of the music, Marc was drawn into a crazy, crazy farandole. Two girl-puppets were flanking him, smiling, one blonde on the left,

the other brunette on the right. And above all this dancing madness, Marcine was having a terrible time, flapping her little hands in her flying tree.

Marc, who at first had struggled, trying with all his might to escape from this activity which the puppets seemed to find very amusing, began to shout with pleasure and to laugh with all his paper teeth. When, at last, the puppets slowed down their movements and the dance was over, Marc exclaimed in amazement:

- Oh, my God, what a pleasure I felt!

- It's a feeling of liberation that you have experienced, my dear Marc," Marcine said joyfully to him. Because we puppets know what freedom means, how precious it is. To be free, to be able to move as one pleases, without being manipulated by anyone, to think freely, to express one's ideas, to satisfy one's desires, all this is magic. Magic can also be found in all this.

Mark sighed. He too often wanted to do things his own way, but he had to face the fact that he was just a little paper man.

The Kingdom of Tolerance

Arriving at a neutral land, north of the Kingdom of Desolation, Mark stops for a moment to catch his breath. The *no-man's-land* at his feet is a meadow covered with tall grass. Marc lies down for a few moments. The grass smells good, and the sky, even if it is made of paper, is a blue wonder.

But it was time to leave. So Mark takes his bewitching stick, knocks three times on the tall grass and immediately finds himself in front of a large door on whose pediment he reads, all amazed:

The Kingdom of Tolerance Intergalactic project

Duration of work: Indefinite

Beneficiaries: Everything that breathes in the Universe

Mark pushes open the door and, crossing the threshold, exclaims:

- Oh, God of tolerance!

Machines of all kinds are moving in all directions. Noises, noises everywhere. DEAFENING. And a lot of movement. A coming and going of people and scrap metal. A huge construction site. Here and there, signs indicating the location of an institution (the "Rainbow School" is displayed on a large eponymous sign and Marc thinks it may be a school for people of all races).

- Excuse me, sir," says Marc to a passer-by carrying a large poster in his arms.
- Mr wants to...", he replies, getting rid of the poster which falls into the grass filled with pretty spring flowers.
- I would like to know what happens in these

land. I'm just passing through and...

- Honoured by your visit, Sir," replies the passer-by politely. Desanges, at your service. I work in this district which will be called Misericordium.
- Is it... a building site?
- But yes, the Kingdom of Tolerance is a galaxy-wide project. It lasts, it will last...
- But I see buildings, gardens, tall buildings, towers. Everything seems ready to welcome people.
- Yes, of course, at this level we have succeeded in solving everything. The Intergalactic Church is also ready to welcome its members of all faiths. There is, however, one small problem, you know. A very small problem which is proving to be a real Chinese puzzle for our Supreme Architect.
- Which one?" asks Marc, half-heartedly.
- Humans," replied the worker, sorry. This intergalactic race, very nice by the way, who live on a small planetary jewel, have not yet signed the Treaty of Accession to the Kingdom of Tolerance.
- And this signature, is it so important, at your level? asks Marc, astonished. Basically, it's a very small planet...
- But, yes, it is very important. For

For us, for our Supreme Architect, the One is in All and All is in the One. Nothing can be done unless humans accept the terms of the Agreement.

- And when do you expect this Treaty to be signed?
 - I don't want to be pessimistic, but I lived for a short time on Earth and I can tell you that men... well, it's difficult... You never know with them. They are nice, in general. But how strange they are! And intolerant. And mean, sometimes, very mean. They think they are the centre of the universe.
- Mark sighed. He loved humans, but he had to face the facts. Sometimes the good people of Earth could become real monsters.
- *Homo homini lupus*, I whispered to him from my earthly world.
 - What do you mean?" said Marc, surprised by my intrusion.
 - This means that people are real wild beasts to their own kind. Mean, inhuman.
 - Sometimes," said Mark, conciliatory.

- Many times," I said, annoyed (that little paper man was so naive!), "I've never been able to find a way out of this.

- Well," said Mark, "I'm a bit more optimistic than you are. And I think that if something were to happen to their planet, humans would stand together.

And as I said this, it leapt into my left hand (it is the hand that created it, for I am left-handed).

- I don't feel like travelling anymore," he sighed. I'm tired. Can I take a nap? We can resume the travels a little later. Who knows what amazing worlds you will send me to, Mr. Writer? Paper worlds. Like me," he sighed. And my little man fell asleep in my arms.

Dawn was approaching. A wisp of pink was beginning to grow timidly on the horizon. The black streaks of the night were retreating. For some time now, the stars had also withdrawn, all drowsy. A new day was about to be born, inscribed in the book of the eternal, and its song about the lonely valley succeeded in waking my little paper man. And, looking up at the spectacular dawn of the paper sky, he whispered in my ear:

- Why are separations so sad?

- So that memories are sweeter, encounters more joyful, life more complicated and more beautiful, I replied, closing my little book.

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