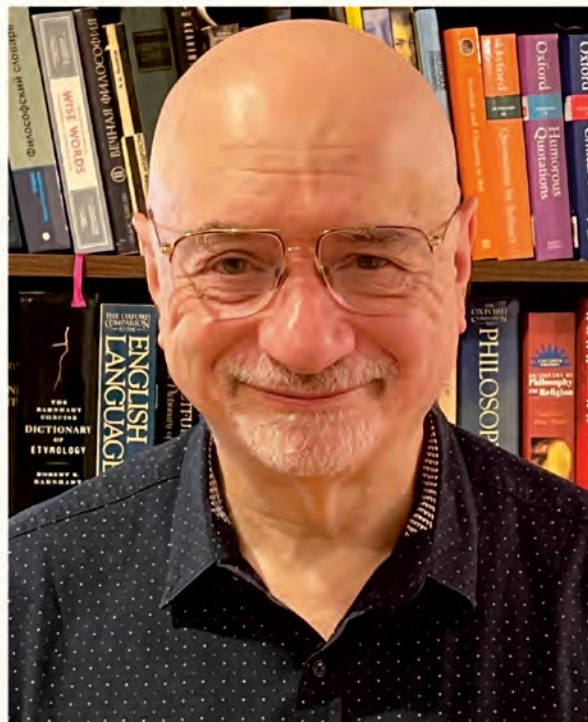




MIKHAIL EPSTEIN
PHILOSOPHICAL CASES

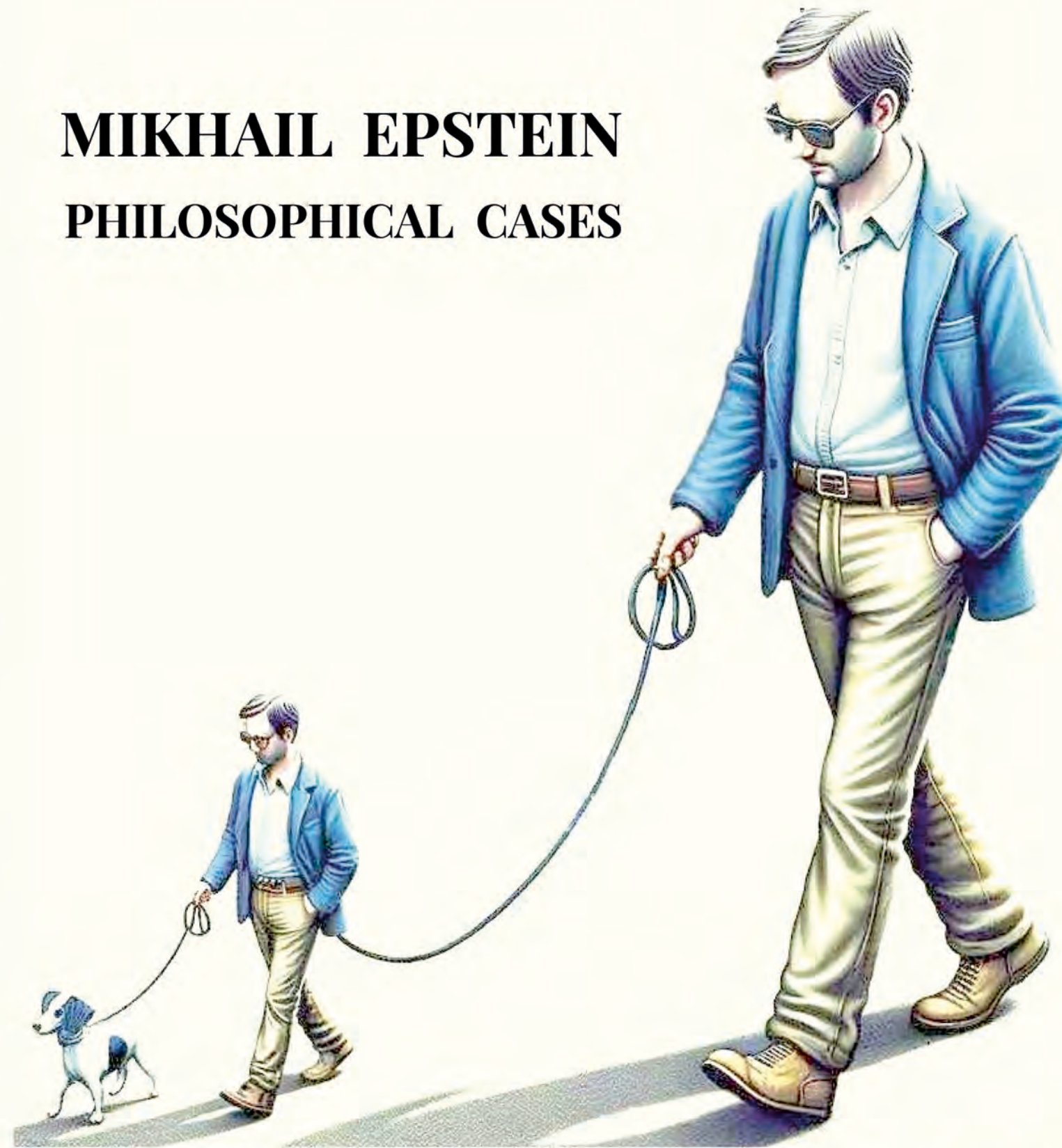
FRANC-TIREUR USA



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**Franc-Tireur
USA**

Philosophical Cases
by Mikhail Epstein

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Abstract

This book is a collection of short parables exploring the mysteries and contradictions of existence. Each story is paired with a unique, AI-generated illustration, which adds a visual dimension to the meditative and provocative texts.

Mikhail N. Epstein is a cultural and literary scholar. He is Samuel Candler Dobbs Emeritus Professor of Cultural Theory and Russian Literature at Emory University. He moved from the USSR to the United States in 1990 and, in 1990–91, was a fellow of the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars in Washington, D.C. He served as a professor at Emory University from 1990 to 2023. From 2012 to 2015, he served as professor and founding director of the Centre for Humanities Innovation at Durham University (UK).

Epstein's research interests include new directions in the humanities; contemporary philosophy and religion, in particular the philosophy of culture and language; the poetics and history of Russian literature; postmodernism; and the evolution of language. Epstein has authored 49 books and over 800 articles. His works have been translated into 26 languages.

He is a recipient of the Andrei Bely Award (St. Petersburg, 1991), the prize of the London Institute of Social Inventions for intellectual creativity (1995), the International Essay competition award (Berlin-Weimar, 1999), the Liberty Prize (New York, 2000), and the Modern Language Association (MLA) Aldo and Jeanne Scaglione Prize for the best book in Slavic studies (US, 2023).

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Preface

...But the strangest
case... Didn't I tell
you?

A. S. Pushkin.
"Mozart and Salieri."

Philosophy usually does without cases, dealing only with principles, ideas, laws, and universals. However, as modern science is inclined to believe, it is chance that lies at the foundation of the world. According to Niels Bohr, and contrary to Albert Einstein, God *does* play dice – in particular, the “dice” of quanta. The most precise of the sciences that deal with the fundamentals of the universe, quantum physics, is built on chance and probability. Why shouldn't philosophy, too, take up chance? Let's give chance a chance!

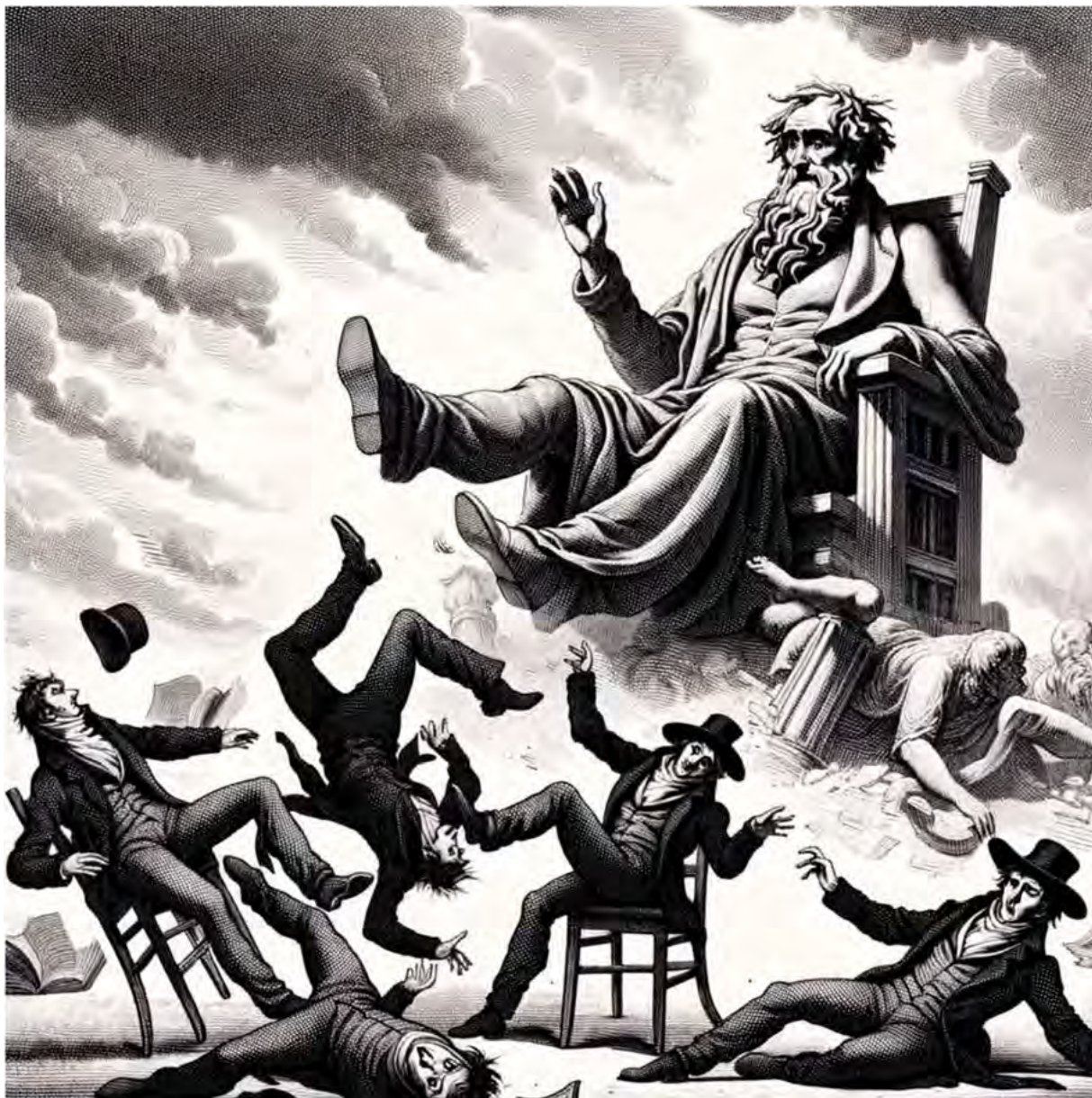
"Philosophical cases" are thought experiments that break the usual connection between phenomena, that split reality into meaningful quanta and give rise to meditation and imagination. Each "case" is a seed of new ideas about the world. In traditional homiletic-allegorical genres like the parable or fable, things or animals usually follow the roles allotted them. The seed grows; the wine is poured into the bellows; the sheep grazes; the dragonfly dances; the ant stores up for winter; the wolf eats the lamb... But in these "Cases," things are disobedient, crossing the boundaries assigned to them a golden quill.

Trade flees its master, draws scribbles, a grain of sand cries out in the desert, a paperclip gives orders. It's like parables turned upside down. Such is the nature of a "case" as a sudden occurrence: it breaks rules and violates expectations. While parables or fables teach us to behave in accordance with the nature of things, and therefore respond to the demands of religion and morality, philosophy questions the existing order; its essence is surprise, the unexpected, the subversion of foundations and the questioning of meanings. This is why, in my view, a chance "case" is a philosophical genre.

There are chance occurrences that are destructive to the order of things, such as in Daniil Kharm's, whose "Chances" or "Cases" ("Sluchai," 1930s) constitute particles of absurdity, quanta of nonsense. For me, to the contrary, what is important is the growth of small particles into the greatest meanings, which include everything from humankind to God, from the atom to the Universe. The world is good and justified in that it allows any mistakes, absurdities, or misconceptions to turn into augmentations of meaning. If Kharm's accident-cases are antisense, then in my understanding they constitute metasense, which includes absurdity.

In Kharm's, the first phrase is usually still meaningful, and then things rapidly disintegrate. For example: "Pushkin had four sons..." – that's wrong, but at least it makes sense. And then it turns out that all these sons were idiots and fell out of their chairs, just as did Pushkin himself. And it ends with a complete absurdity: "...at one end, Pushkin is always falling from his chair, and at the other end, so does his son. It's an outrage, enough to drive out all the saints!"

I would continue: "And when all the saints were driven out, it turned out that Pushkin himself was the main saint. And although he fell from all the chairs, he rose higher than the Alexander Pillar. What a son of a bitch!"



This is how Kharms's antisense grows into a super-sense. What seems absurd and idiotic turns out to be the acrobatics of chance, a multivalent game of reason. Each case is an overthrow of the usual picture of the world.

These short, several-line allegories are accompanied by illustrations created using AI (Dall-E 3).¹ The pictures produced in response to my queries and prompts sometimes deviate from the text, introducing additional details, or omitting certain moments from the story. The illustrations are not a literal translation from verbal to pictorial language, but the creation of self-valuable images, of new associations that suggest the further development of the situation.

Like "philosophical cases" (*sluchai*) themselves, pictures also *happen* (*sluchaiutsia*): their birth in AI is as whimsical and unpredictable as the flash of a thought or image in the human brain. Contrary to the stereotypical opinion that such creativity is "mechanistic," each picture is unique. The AI itself cannot repeat it: in response to the exact same request, at the exact same moment, it produces a completely different image. To paraphrase Heraclitus, you cannot enter the same AI twice.

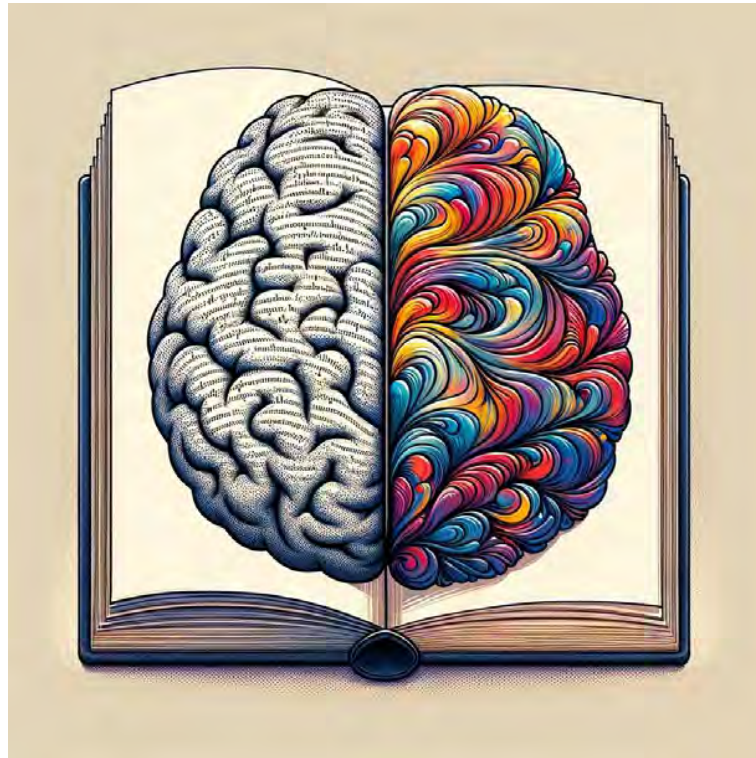
If you combine classical clarity, surreal imagination, and technical sophistication, adding humor and irony, you get an art form that might be called "techno-art" or "neuro-art." In the Afterword, the AI takes up not only the brush, but also the pen, composing three additional microstories, also with their own illustrations.

¹ The collection "Philosophical Cases" was originally published in Russian in the journal *Znamia*, 8, 2022, P. 194-203.



An AI creates its own self-portrait

The book is structured as a series of dual spreads, each comprising paired elements: texts on the left and images on the right. This layout mirrors the brain's hemispheric functions—the left hemisphere, known for its role in logical thinking and language comprehension, is represented by the text; while the right hemisphere, associated with visual and artistic perception, is symbolized by the images. As readers navigate these pages, they encounter a dialogue between the two hemispheres, culminating in a cohesive work of verbal and pictorial art. This unique presentation serves as a visual model of the brain, eloquently illustrating its dual nature through the very structure of the book.



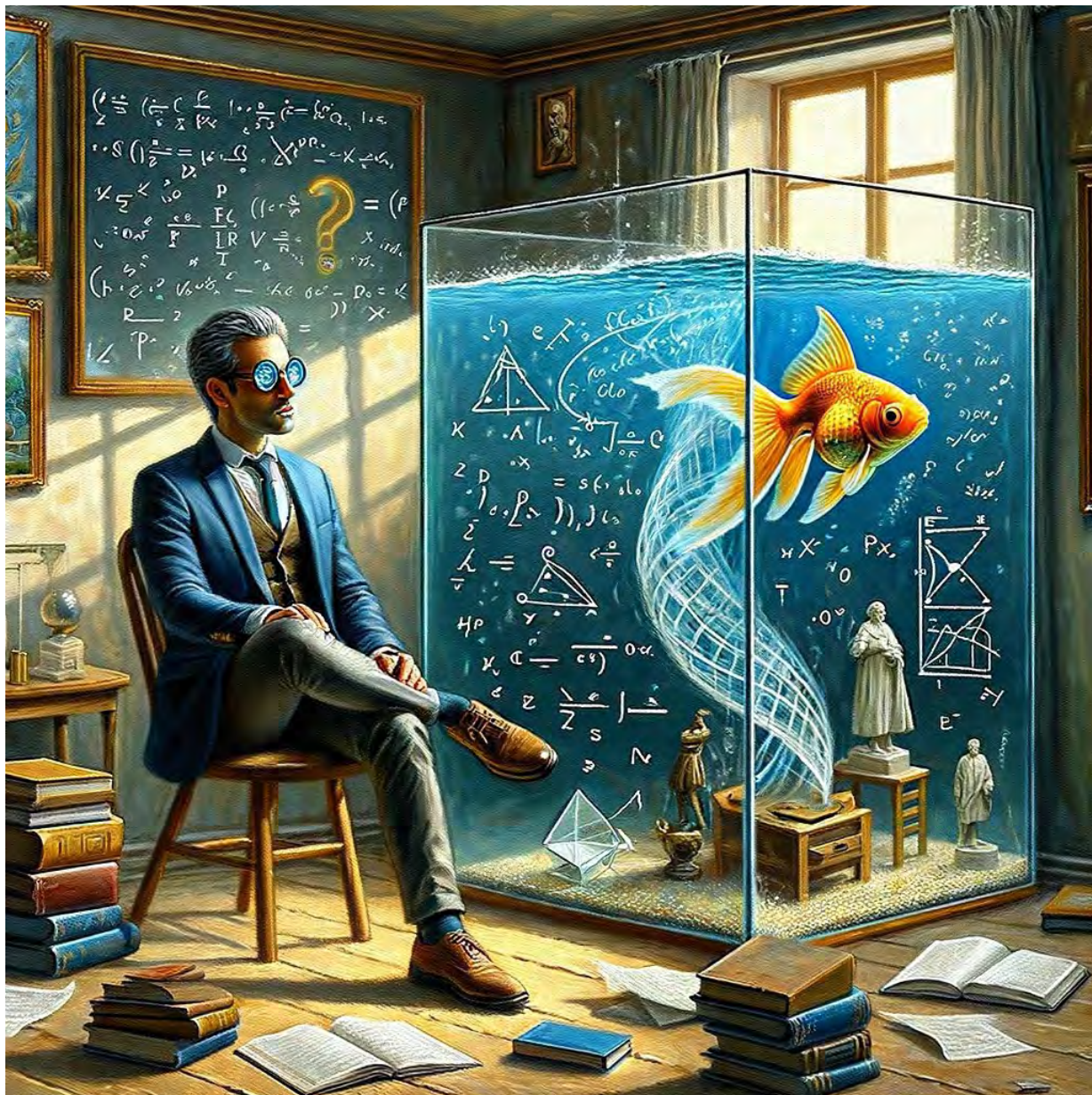
Man and Dog

A man went for a walk in the neighborhood and encountered other walkers, except that the latter all had dogs with them. He felt awkward: they were taking care of business, while he, an idler, was just walking himself. To ease his discomfort, he began to quietly bark to himself, and to pretend to pull himself on a leash – one long enough to enable him to sniff everything around him. This made his life easier, as it helped him distinguish two personas within himself: one holding the leash and the other wearing the collar. All that remained was to *conduct himself* appropriately. And so, whenever he was asked how one should *conduct oneself*, his response was always: “With a long leash.”



A Little Fish

A philosopher paid his friends a visit, and while they were busy preparing dinner, he observed a solitary fish in a fishbowl. It swam gracefully, its fins gently moving and bubbles rising around it, its entire world seemingly confined to the water. Feeling a pang of sympathy, the philosopher asked, 'How is the world treating you, goldfish?' In response, the fish flicked its tail, swam towards the fishbowl wall, and seemed to inquire, 'And how is the world treating you?' The philosopher pondered his own life - his city, country, institution, administration, routine - and found himself envying the fish, which was surrounded only by water. But on the other hand, he too now felt as though he were in a fishbowl.



Trade without a Master

Trade was fearful of its master, who always worked with excessive force. When he hammered nails, the nail-heads would sink deep into the boards, sometimes going through entirely. When he dug a ditch for pipe-laying, it was so deep that groundwater filled it. And when he ruled a state, his governance was so harsh that all dissenters found themselves locked away. One day, overcome with fear, trade could no longer endure, and fled far, far away. There, it roamed from country to country, trading in its own self, quietly and unobtrusively. Meanwhile, the master, having abandoned his hammer and shovel, succumbed to a deep, unending sleep.

Sometimes, parting with one's master is a good tradeoff.



The Golden Quill

An old poet presented a golden quill to a young one, who accepted the gift with reverence and asked, "What have you written with this?" "Nothing," the great poet replied. "I've only ever worked on a typewriter and computer." Puzzled, the young poet inquired, "Then what use did you have for a quill?" The elder explained, "I used it to doodle all sorts of nonsense and to make ink blots. This kept me from writing thousands of bad poems." "A marvelous gift indeed!" exclaimed the young poet and placed the quill on his desk. From that day on, he never wrote another poem.



The Missing Word

A poet had forgotten a word. He tried to remember it, but this was complicated by the fact that he had also forgotten its meaning. And what he needed it for. He spent the rest of his life in search of that lost word, writing numerous poems in the hope that it would suddenly emerge among the lines. Eventually, he came to a realization: even if the word did appear, he would no longer recognize it. When the poet passed away, everyone acknowledged that, in the end, he had succeeded in expressing his unique word and in creating his own universe.



Two Books

Two open books lay side by side on a desk. Their reader's eyes moved back and forth between them. Then, in an unexpected twist, the books entwined their pages to become one. The following day, the reader remarked in confusion, "I don't understand how one can express completely opposite ideas on adjacent pages. The author must be out of his mind." Meanwhile, the newly unified book, now thicker and seemingly wiser, pondered: "Why is an author who harbors two opposing ideas in his mind considered crazier than a reader who likewise merges opposing ideas by reading different books in succession?"

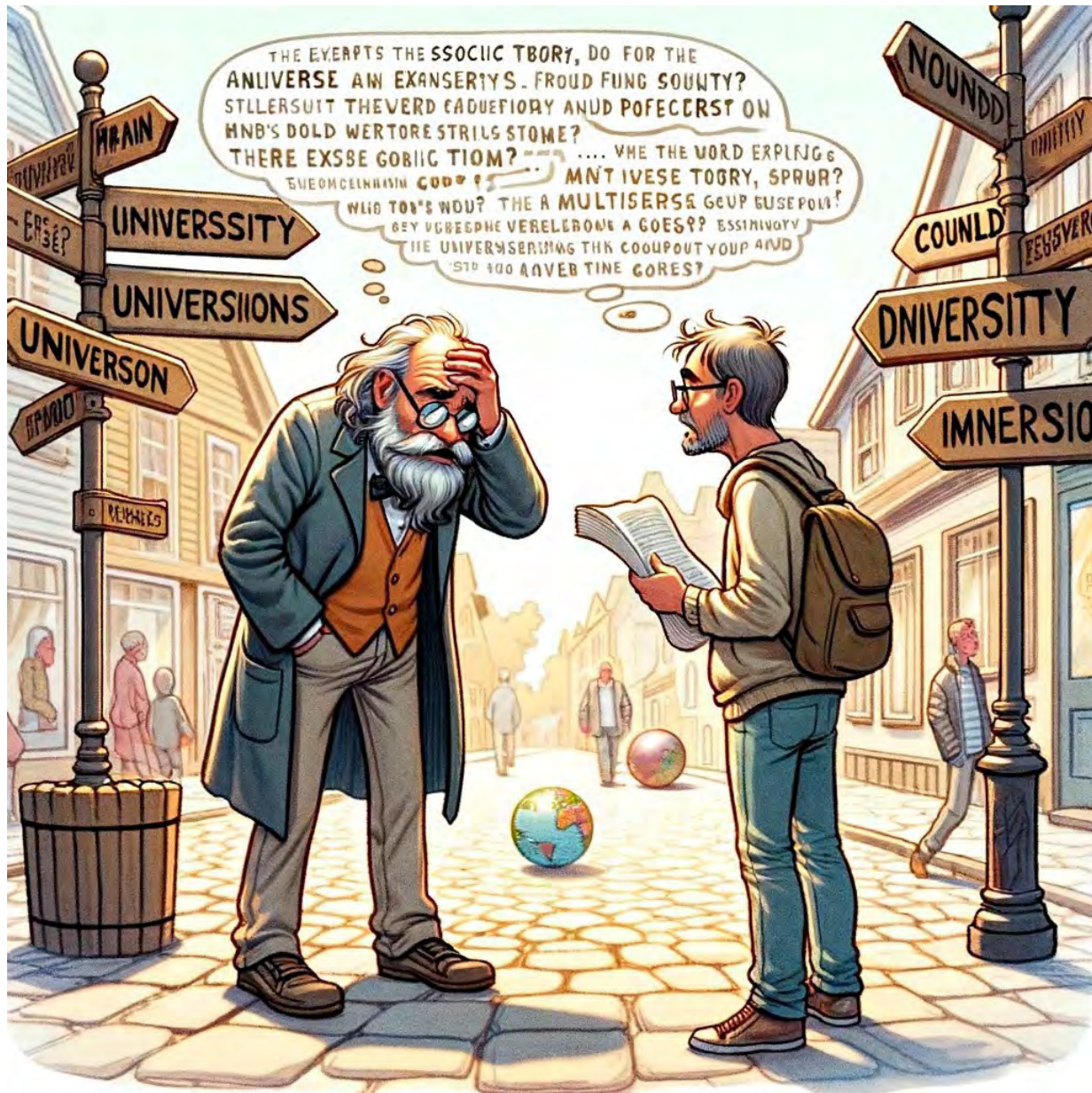
The next day, every book in the library merged into one enormous volume – a compendium, this reader realized, by the crazy author he'd been reading his whole life.



The Professor Is in Town

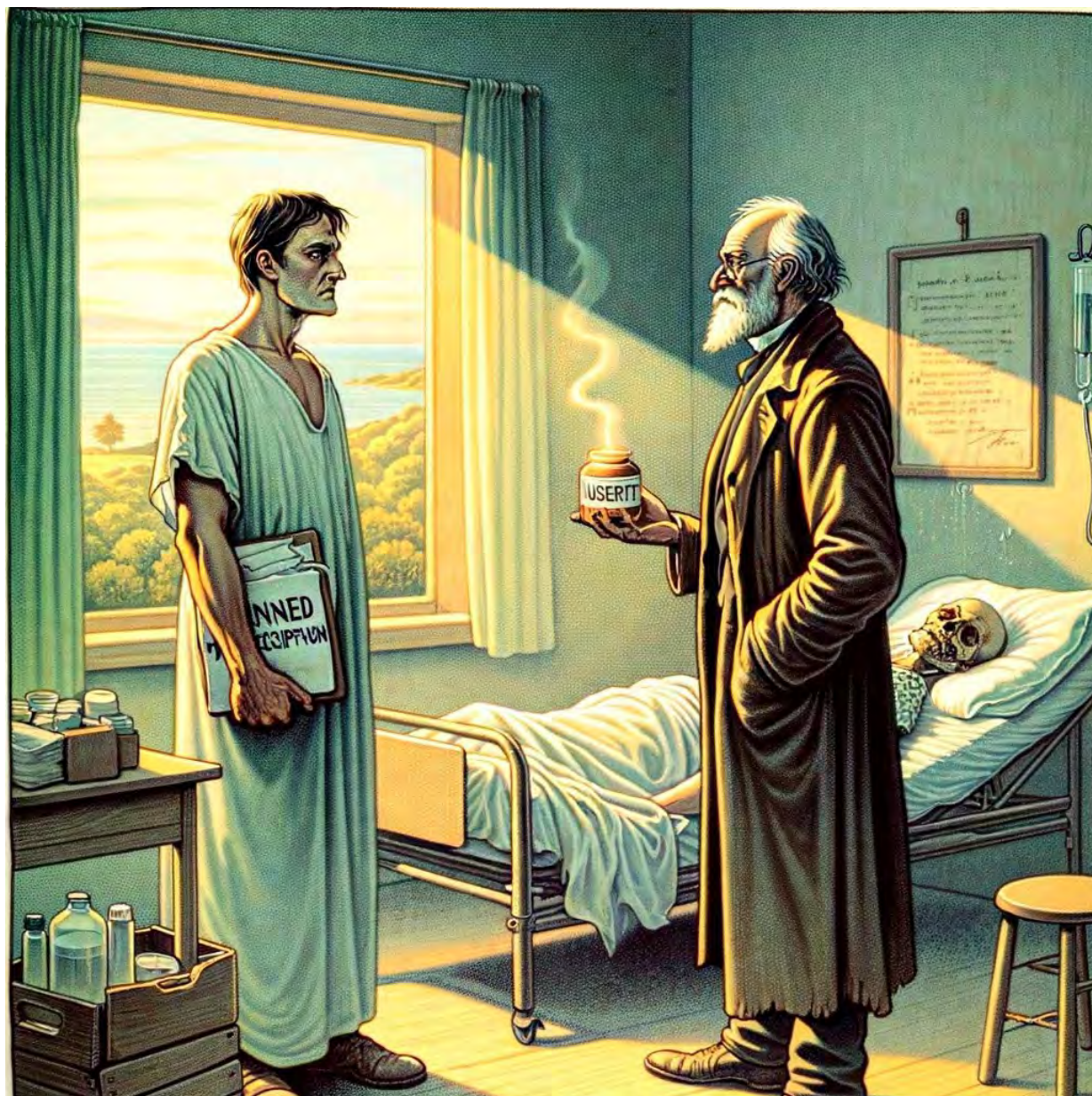
A professor was invited to a certain town for a conference. Following a successful presentation, he set out to explore the town and quickly traversed nearly all its streets. However, he soon realized that he was missing a crucial piece of information. Observing this elderly man deep in thought, a passerby approached and asked kindly, "Can I help you?" The professor, looking puzzled, inquired: "Where am I?" "You're on Main Street," answered the passerby. "That's University Street, and over there is Forest Street." "I know that!" exclaimed the professor. "But what town is this?" "Middletown," the passerby replied. The professor's confusion deepened. "But what country is this?" The passerby began to suspect the professor was out of touch with reality. Unfazed, the professor pressed on: "And what world is this? Dammit, how many dimensions are there here? Does time flow backwards? Otherwise I don't seem to have long to live in this place."

It turned out that the professor was a specialist in multiverse studies, and was always conducting field research, wherever he might be. And he had no interest in the minor science known as geography.



Doctor and Patient

There was once a stubborn, capricious patient who consistently refused to follow his doctor's prescribed treatment. This patient was widely criticized for his obstinacy. When he died, the doctor reflected: "How noble of him! He would have died regardless of whether he followed my advice, but he chose to shoulder the blame himself."



The Theologian and the Atheists

A theologian undertook to defend God from the criticisms of atheists. In response, the atheists decided to strangle the theologian to death, to see what God might do to them for this. They vigilantly watched the heavens. One day passed, then another, and on the third day, one atheist approached another and remarked: "We were wrong. God is indeed merciful."



Stone Face

"I love you just the way you are," he declared, his expression unyielding as stone. "God," she thought, "nothing will ever reach him." Throughout their life together, she had tried relentlessly to elicit even a glimmer of genuine emotion from him — initially through passion, then stormy arguments, and eventually adultery. But all her efforts were in vain: he remained as beautiful and impassive as ever, repeating "I love you" ten times a day, as if the words were devoid of meaning. Even now, after she had confessed to something despicable, shameful... "You could make marble out of a person like this," she mused. "Is my only option to leave him, as handsome and desirable as he is?"

"God," he thought, "if only I can endure until the end, perhaps she will leave on her own accord. But if I show even the slightest weakness or shed a tear, she will cling to me, incessantly drawing out my tears, making me both a victim of and accomplice to her despicable acts. I hate her!"

"I love you anyway," he said.



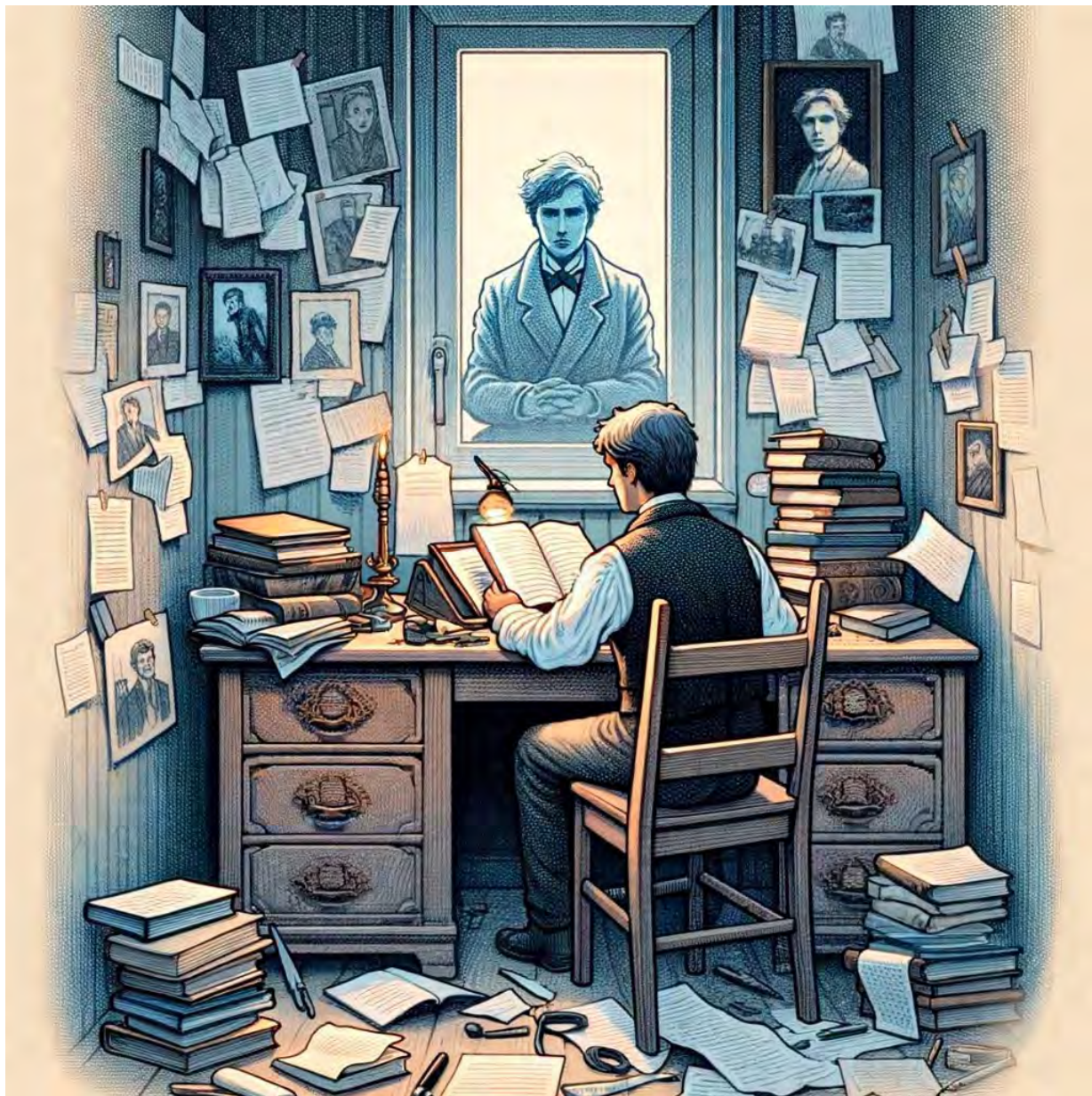
Stories

Maxim was in love with Katya, and she reciprocated. He told her stories from his life, both good and bad. The further along they went, the more bad stories he told, testing the strength of her feelings. He confessed to bad deeds and thoughts. She didn't reproach him, but tried to understand. And in response, she told stories from her own life, denigrating herself slightly, so as not to shine too purely against his background.

At the same time, Maxim was also going out with Masha, and likewise telling her stories from his life. Masha was sensible and fair-minded, and told Maxim to his face what she thought of him. They were no longer in love, but they remained friends.

One day, Maxim told Masha about Katya and shared the latter's stories with her, and Masha told Maxim to get lost. Then Maxim went to Katya and told her about Masha, and that he had shared Katya's stories with her. Katya also told Maxim to get lost.

And Maxim, left alone, began to write stories. Now they are read by many people, but he has no friends or loved ones.



M and W

A man was so absentminded that his greatest fear was accidentally entering the women's restroom. One day, he went into a restroom, and there he saw a beautiful young woman. He dashed out, red as a lobster—so great was his shyness. And right after him, having seen the man, the woman also dashed out of the restroom, just as red with embarrassment. They felt such an instant connection of souls that they were ready to offer one another hand and heart on the spot.

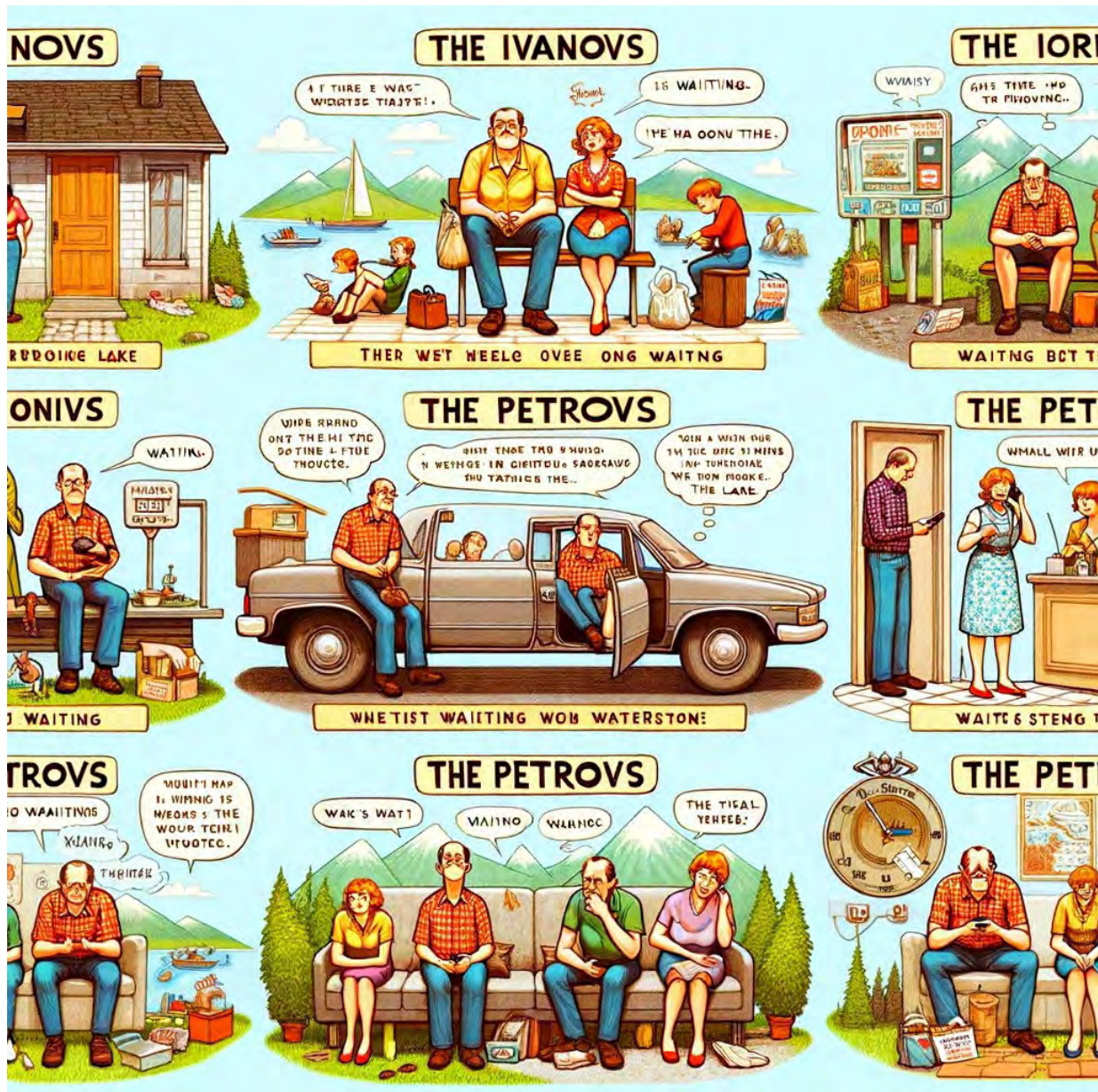
Let's stop the story there, and refrain from following their subsequent rush to check the letter M or W, to see which of them had been the more absentminded. After all, finding a soulmate is such a rare occurrence in our fast-paced world that it's best to stop there.



The Ivanovs and the Petrovs

The Ivanovs decided to make an outing to the lakeside, and invited the Petrovs along, also so as to have company during the drive. They spent half an hour waiting for the Petrovs at their house. A stop at a store added another fifteen minutes of waiting for Mrs. Petrov. The Petrovs spent twenty minutes waiting while the Ivanovs were on the phone with their children. They waited eight minutes for Mrs. Ivanov to come out of the bathroom, followed by a twelve-minute wait for Mrs. Petrov at another bathroom break. Everyone spent half an hour waiting for Mr. Petrov, who had wandered off. They sat in the car for ten minutes, listening to Mr. Ivanov recount a story about the time ten years ago when his car had broken down. There was a fifteen-minute wait for Mrs. Ivanov and Mrs. Petrov to change in the changing rooms. They waited half an hour for Mr. Ivanov and Mr. Petrov to fetch beer.

No sooner had they finally settled in to relax than it was time to leave. Things did not go as expected, as the only thing everyone did was to wait for one another. One should always subtract the amount of *interaction* from the total of joint actions.



The Sea-Man

A man came to the seaside for a vacation, and for several days never took his eyes off the crashing waves; he did not even feel like swimming. Suddenly, he felt himself to be a sea. It was as if something great and boundless was heaving within him. He didn't know what his newfound inspiration would manifest as — poetry, music, or painting — but he silently harbored it within himself. Upon his return from the seaside, friends noticed a peculiar change in him. "He's fallen in love – a vacation romance," suggested one. "He's been drinking; look at him shake," observed another. "He's bloated, as if he ate enough for three," remarked a third. And none of them realized that standing before them was simply a sea-man.



The Pink Wolf

A grandfather once gave his grandson a pink wolf, which quickly became the boy's favorite toy. He would place it beside him on his pillow each night. However, as time passed, the wolf's plush belly ripped, and it was relegated to a corner with other old toys. One day, the boy found a penny on the floor and slipped it into the wolf's belly. Then he began to take note of the spare change left by grownups on the table, secretly taking one coin at a time to add to his stash. He delighted in imagining the wealth he would amass and what he could do with it when he grew up.

One day, while tidying up, the grandfather touched the wolf, and it jingled. The grandfather shook the wolf, and from it came spilling copper and silver coins. Hearing the noise, the boy rushed in and turned pinker than the wolf. The grandfather exclaimed: "Wow, what a greedy wolf! Look at all the money he's swallowed!" He threw the wolf in the garbage and used the coins to buy flowers for grandma. From that point on, the boy never saved money again, having learned a lifelong lesson: if you have a wolf, don't feed it.



Berdyayev's Cat and Pavlov's Dog

The philosopher Berdyayev loved his cat Muri and believed in the immortality of its soul. One day, Muri's soul encountered the soul of a dog who had belonged to the physiologist Pavlov – one of the victims of a merciless scientific massacre. The cat's soul asked the nameless dog's soul:

"How will your tormentor justify himself before God?"

"He was a scientist," replied the dog's soul, "and I suffered for the sake of science, though no one loved me."

So it goes: one soul is saved by love, another by suffering.



The Egg and the Chicken

An egg began to argue with a chicken, insisting it had come first. The chicken snarled: "It's not for eggs to lecture a chicken." The egg made a scientific case for its viewpoint: the first chicken had hatched from an egg laid by a female dinosaur.

"Oh, so that's how it is," said the chicken. "In that case, I won't lay a single egg ever again."

"Oh, so that's how it is," replied the egg. "From now on, not a single chick will hatch from me ever again."

And they stuck to this — a stone egg and a virgin chicken — and there was nothing left for them to argue about, since each turned out to be right.



The Swan

A swan glided across a pond, ignoring the onlookers captivated by its elegance. The sun was shining, the air was still, and the water's surface was pristine and mirror-like. But the swan was perturbed by another swan that constantly swam next to it, never falling behind by even a single stroke. It neither came closer nor moved away. It smoothly evaded any attempt to attack it. This was agonizing and unsettling: to be in the constant presence of another.

The swan took no pleasure in the sun, nor in the expanse of the water, and grew irritated by the people who waved and called to it, for they distracted it from the issue at hand: who was this strange rival that one could never get even with? Sometimes the swan forgot its unease, particularly when the weather soured, the clouds gathered, and the rain fell. But on clear days, the swan understood the full horror of this obsessive apparition, which would haunt it eternally.



Floor and Ceiling

The floor had spent its whole life staring at the ceiling, while overhead, the ceiling in turn never took its eyes off the floor. Each harbored a silent thought:

"We're the same size, but how low you've fallen!"

"You're no bigger than me, but you're so highfalutin!"

But however hard they tried to take the merest step toward one another, the walls wouldn't let them.



The Paper Clip

A paperclip was dying of boredom, for it no longer had anything to do. People hardly used papers anymore, and still less did they have the need to clip them together. A box of paperclips lay neglected beside the computer – their gravedigger – but it had been ages since anyone touched them. Suddenly, into the room came something big — the dresser even made way for it, and the desk sagged. This something was just like the paperclip, only hundreds of times bigger: not a clip, but an enormous CLAMP.

"What purpose do you serve?" the paperclip squeaked. "There are hardly any papers left; we're not needed."

"What are papers to me?!" boomed the CLAMP. "I shall bind the People, for I am the Bond. And my grip is an iron one." And it began to dictate its edicts to the computer.



Knife and Glue

A knife was envious of glue for being able to join things so firmly together. And so one day it lunged at the glue, intent on stabbing it. But it got stuck in the sticky mass. "It has glued me!" the knife cried out in dismay. This illustrates that connection is stronger than division.



Matches without a Box

A man was rummaging through old papers when he suddenly found a match at the bottom of the drawer. It was intact, in perfect condition, with a plump, dark maroon matchhead. It had been a long time since he had smoked, and even back then he had only dabbled, but suddenly he remembered the sulfuric odor of a match as it struck right under his nose, giving off heat and an acrid smoke that tickled his nostrils. He suddenly had the urge to inhale once more that pungent, suffocating scent, which he had cherished perhaps even more than the cigarette smoke itself.

However, there was no matchbox, and without the phosphorus strip, the match could not be lit. And suddenly he felt himself to be just such a match, left without a box — still capable of igniting, but lacking something to be struck against. His personality remained, but the time with which to kindle it had passed.



The Mirror

A mirror languished in its emptiness. Countless people had peered into it, but only to see themselves, never sparing a thought for the mirror itself. It lacked even a frame to draw attention.

One day, an unattractive young man came up to the mirror and began to look into it for a long while. For the first time, the mirror felt a sense of being seen for itself, as if the man was attempting to glean from it the secret of its pure and truthful reflection.

The man left, and the mirror found itself missing him. When he returned, he brought another mirror and positioned it to see himself from all angles. Yet, finding no improvement in his appearance, he left, disheartened.

Now, the two mirrors continuously look into one another, reflecting an endless array of mirrors. They no longer languish in emptiness, but overflow with happiness. "Apart, we are nothing," they say to one another. "But together, we are infinity."



Knives and Mirrors

During his travels, N. found himself in a remote area where there were no mirrors, and so he looked at his reflection in the blade of a knife. On his return journey, he entered a world where things and their properties were jumbled. Knives became mirrors, and their blades were dull, while mirrors were dull, but their edges were sharp as knives. N. himself began to resemble his friend M. in appearance, and in demeanor, his acquaintance O. Red flowers turned yellow. The needles of evergreen conifers fell off. Some plant stems started to sprout seashells. Soldiers turned to tin, and people's thoughts became legible, running across their foreheads as if on a screen.

No one knew who had arranged this bedlam, or why. Everyone was perpetually astonished by themselves and each other. But the most surprising thing was that everyone got used to it, and the world as a whole did not change one bit.



A Grain of Sand and the Desert

A grain of sand cried out: "I am so small that I get lost in a heap of my own kind. Just looking at the desert is sickening — there are countless others just like me."

"No matter," responded the desert. "Now you are unique – a voice crying out in the wilderness."



A Speck of Dust and the Sun

A speck of dust was basking in a ray of the setting sun, seeming to itself to be the pinnacle of creation. The sun went out. The speck of dust then decided: "At last, I have become myself."



The Universe and the Antiparticle

The Universe was swelling with immense pride, and so an antiparticle decided to teach it a lesson by blowing it up. The other antiparticles, however, did not support this idea. They found it convenient to be in the minority; becoming the majority would mean assuming responsibility for themselves, having to unite into anti-galaxies, form anti-stars and anti-planets. If you're "anti," you can save yourself a hassle by remaining just a particle.



A Fallen Lemon

A lemon had been ripening on the branch for a long time, growing heavier and juicier. Eventually, it fell to the ground.

Lying there, it thought to itself: "I'm feeling a little sour today."



A Blade of Grass and Gold

A geologist said to a blade of grass: "I need to uproot you, as there's gold beneath you."

"We are alive," responded the blade of grass. "Let us love and cherish each other. Gold doesn't care where it lies – it's dead."

Thus, they established the Union of the Living, soon joined by a ladybug. But then, the gold itself spoke up: "I am a living metal, born from microorganisms, from bacteria."

"Nowadays everyone wants to be a living creature," the ladybug grumbled. "Look at you, taking up the fashion for life, but how many people have perished because of you!"

And so the following was added to the Union's bylaws: "Even the noblest corpse is not a life form."



Bold Little Ones

Once, a pea, a needle, and a mouse gathered to debate which of them was the littlest and boldest.

The mouse said: "Countless people tried to pull the turnip from the vegetable patch, to no avail. Even the cat was of no use. But when I gave a tug, they were able to pull the turnip right out!"

"Big deal," said the Pea. "I'm littler than you, and bolder. They piled twenty mattresses and twenty eiderdown featherbeds on me, yet I still kept the princess from sleeping – in the morning she was covered in bruises. That's what I'm capable of!"

"That's all pettiness compared to me," said the needle. "Inside me resides the death of Koschei the Deathless, the strongest man in the world. No one can defeat him without getting to me first. There's an island in the ocean; on the island there's an oak tree; buried beneath the oak tree there's a chest. Inside the chest is a hare; inside the hare is a duck; inside the duck is an egg; and inside the egg, there's me – the death of Koschei. And the water and the land and the plants and the animals and the egg, which is the embryo of everything – all of that is just to get to my tip. I am paramount!"

Suddenly, into the circle of quarrelers, there flew a quantum, so little that at first they did not notice it. "Who are you?" they asked. "What fairy tale do you come from?"

"My tale is called Quantum Physics," replied the quantum. "And what can you do?" they inquired.

"Anything you like. I am both a particle and a wave. I was born from nothing. No one knows where I am or where I'm headed, and if they try to find out, they lose their knowledge of my power and speed. But I myself know what another quantum at the furthest edge of the universe is up to. I traverse multiple slits in various directions simultaneously. I can be anything I want – my life is one big 'maybe.' And with each new potentiality, a new world emerges, distinct from the rest. The world is me, and the many worlds are also me!" the quantum declared proudly.

The mouse, the needle, and the pea heard the quantum out; they didn't believe it entirely, but agreed that it was the most fairylike of tales, even if this tale was called "physics."



Day and Night

The night passed without noticing that the day was coming to greet it. It neither responded to the day's wish of "good night" nor offered any "good day" in return. Feeling slighted, the day remained gloomy all day.



The Lightning and the Rainbow

They had never met. But one day, in one part of the sky, a thunderstorm was still belatedly rumbling at the same time as, in another part, the sun began to shine through a prism of raindrops. It was then that the lightning first saw the rainbow and was taken aback, wondering what sort of heavenly bird this could be that had unfurled its multicolored tail. For its part, seeing the lightning, the rainbow recoiled in fear and disgust at this bent-up snake writhing in convulsions.

"I am war and retribution!" declared the lightning.

"I am peace and hope!" countered the rainbow.

"I am followed by thunder and terror."

"After me comes glory and light."

"I was the chief deity of the ancients, for there was nothing they feared more than a thunderstorm."

"I am the symbol of the covenant between God and earth, as it is written, 'I set my rainbow in the cloud, as a sign of the covenant.'"

Their debate was short-lived, as the sky soon cleared. The storm withdrew, the rainbow faded, and white clouds drifted across the blue expanse. In that moment, it became clear that the flash of lightning and the radiance of the rainbow were manifestations of the same power—the sun energizing the moisture in the heavens.

"Yay, the rain's stopped! Let's go for a walk!" a girl shouted, peering out the window. And she asked her parents: "Which is stronger: the lightning or the rainbow?"



Afterword

The neural network, without hanging up its brush, now takes up the pen.

This little book was born from a collaboration with AI, and it seems only fair to allow it not just to illustrate my stories, but also to author a few of its own. Thus, I now pass the baton of authorship to it. The following texts and pictures are the creations of Chat GPT-4 and Dall-E 3.

The Chicken and the Scrambled Egg

In a realm where the sun rises at midnight and stars twinkle at noon, there lived a chicken unfamiliar with darkness. Her feathers shimmered with light, leaving trails of radiance with every step. Yet she felt a profound loneliness, for in her world of unending light, there were no shadows—hence no secrets.

One day, under a crystal-clear sky, the chicken pondered: "Might there be a secret within my egg?" Instead of nesting on it as usual, she chose to grant it the gift of freedom. To her wonder, the egg cracked open, releasing a brilliant egg-sun, aglow with yellow light and warmth.

No longer was the chicken alone. Her light intertwined with the warmth of the egg-sun and albumen-clouds, casting an enchanting dance of light and shadow. There was now room in this world for the song of the wind, the whisper of the grass, and, of course, for new fairy tales, born in the glow of a sunset, even an egg-sunset.

In a world where everyone wonders what there was in the beginning—the egg or the light bulb, nature or technology—the *beginning*, itself, decided that it was time to create, to transform the end of one cycle into the embryo of another, into a new sun and clouds created out of a scrambled egg.



The River and the Stone

At the bottom of a river lay a large stone that was proud of its steadfastness. "I am strong and unshakable," it declared, "capable of withstanding any test." The river heard these words and smiled, flowing gently around it. One day, a wise man came to the river and, seeing the stone, remarked: "True strength lies not in immobility but in the ability to adapt and change." The stone scoffed in response: "I will remain here forever, while you, sage, will vanish like all mortals." The wise man, however, just shook his head, saying, "Time is a great teacher, and you will eventually learn its lessons."

The years flowed by like the water in the river, and the stone gradually noticed that bits of its being were being borne away by the current. And it was also being pushed closer to the shore. At first, the stone resisted, but little by little it realized that each lost particle made its shape that much more perfect, and its surface smoother and shinier. Finally, the stone understood the sage: true strength is not found in resisting change, but in the ability to become part of something greater.

And when, one day, a child reached for the stone, the latter smiled; after all, now it was a beautiful, smooth pebble that could reflect light and joy. The child was captivated by the play of light on its facets, and took the pebble with him. Thus did the stone leave the river, but it did not feel lost. Each time its smooth surface reflected light, it remembered the river that had taught it wisdom.



The Labyrinth

In a certain kingdom there was a labyrinth that did not resemble any known to people. Its walls were adorned with flowers, and the water in its streams shone like mirrors. Statues of sages of the past stared into the distance, as if pondering the enigma of eternity. In this labyrinth, there lived people, each of whom was occupied with their own pursuits. Some cultivated plants, others studied the stars, still others composed music. And although each was engrossed in their own craft, they shared a common dream: to find the labyrinth's center, rumored to house a garden with a wish-granting tree.

Among the labyrinth's residents was Eian, a young gardener. From the eldest sage, he learned that the center could only be reached by navigating the maze without touching its shadows. Setting out on this journey, Eian soon realized that the shadows quickly changed with the movement of the sun. He moved with agility, weaving and slipping through the shadows like a dancer following a complex choreography. As the sun was near setting, Eian, drenched in sweat, found himself at a dead end, surrounded on all sides by shadows.

In a moment of despair, he looked up at the setting sun and saw his own shadow merging with those of the labyrinth, creating a path. Realizing that the shadows were not barriers but guides, he made his way across this shadow bridge and arrived at the garden. There, he found not a tree, but a mirror. And there he understood that the shadows were part of the journey, and the destination was self-discovery.



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