

THE STORY OF Ó, by Steven Flusty.

TANTRUM THE FIRST, or, There are Many Ways to Make a World.

I know a story of a baby god who found a long and curling vine that sprouted many ripe hand grenades, so he plucked one off and played with it until the pin came out. It made a very big bang. But that is not a very good way to make a world, because when you make a world this way you do not get to enjoy it yourself. And when the pin comes out it is not a pretty story, you would not like me to describe it.

But there are other ways to make a world.

You can make worlds the way I do. I find things that already are, and then I tear pieces off of them, and then stick and stitch those pieces together with other ones to make new worlds. That is an easy way, because I am very lazy.

But how do you make a world when you have nothing to tear pieces from at all, when there is nothing there but you, no matter how lazy you are?

I know a story of somebody who lived in a place where there was nothing. Nothing at all, except himself of course.

Or maybe it was herself. Or maybe it was a herself who wanted to be a himself, or a himself who was turning into a herself, or something that was somewhere in between himself and herself and liked it fine that way. That is

a problem with how we talk. Everything has to be him, or her, or maybe it. And nobody wants to be it. But there are other ways to talk that do not care if you are a him or a her, and have one word that can mean both. One of these words is hän. Another one is ő. Can you say ő? Neither can I. But I will call the person who lived in the place where there was nothing ő, because that is what ő was, and ő is easier to write than hän. Remember, I am very lazy.

Ő lived all by őself in a big empty space, a space so big and so empty it wasn't even a space at all, because there were no buildings or beaches or even a horizon to make it a space. And because there was nothing there at all, nothing except ő, ő was very bored. There was nothing and nobody to play with, and nobody to even like ő. So ő was very bored, and very, very lonely, and needed to make places to be and things to play with. Ő needed it so badly, it burned like a roaring fire deep inside.

But how do you make somewhere and something out of nowhere and nothing? Ő had an idea. While ő was surrounded by nothing, ő did have something. It was a pair of pants, or maybe a kilt. Which is a good thing, because ő was not used to having others around, and so was shy, and would have been very embarrassed to be completely naked. And ő's pants, or maybe kilt, had a pocket. And in that pocket was dis. A whole lot of dis.

Dis can be a useful thing to have when you have nothing else. Dis can make one thing into all sorts of things, even when that one thing is no thing at all. When you sprinkle it onto some of your nothing, it will make that no thing into dis thing, which makes it different from dat thing over dere. That is the power of dis and also why it is called dis. It makes the difference between dis and dat.

So ó reached into the pocket, took out some dis, and sprinkled it on the no thing right in front of ó. And that no thing became a world of things.

But ó had never done this before, and did not know how much dis to use, and did not want to waste it. So ó did not use enough. All the disses and dats in ó's new world did not come out very different at all. Everything was beige and grey. Grey. Not even gray, like when you mix black and white with deep blue. The buildings were grey concrete boxes that all looked alike, made of smaller grey boxes stacked on top of each other. The people were all beige, and never smiled or said things to each other like "hello my friend, it's a beautiful day, isn't it?" And it was never a beautiful day, because the sky was also always grey. Even the parks were grey, made of leafless trees on patches of dead grass on patches of dirt. And while there was a beach, it was full of beige sand that slumped into grey water, with no waves to make a sound and no smell of sea salt. There was not even ice cream, only ice. And since every dis looked pretty much like every dat, the world was so bored that it yawned and just gave up. It fell apart back into nothing, and spilled all its dis in bits and pieces into the emptiness beneath it.

A worker who knows how to do the work of making worlds would have cleaned up and started again. But ó did not know how to do this work, because ó had never done it before. So ó did not clean up. Instead, ó just left the spilled dis where it fell, and began again. Ó sprinkled more dis on more of the no thing in front of ó. But ó was not going to make the same mistake again. This time, ó used a lot of dis. So much dis that every dis became so different from every dat that the world turned out a very exciting place. There were buildings that looked like black towers that burped flame, and ones that looked like origami flowers folded from huge mirrors, and even ones that looked exactly like gigantic donuts. There were big violet octophants with tentacles and trunks, and zebras striped black with banana yellow or

electric blue, and great acid green clouds of escaped parakeets. There were parks filled with palm trees and eucalyptus, with Aztec marigolds and night-blooming jasmine. There was even ice cream that tasted like saffron and champa flower. And there were beige people, but also people the color of purple corn punch and others like persimmon mixed with cinnamon. And the beach had huge waves, and smelled very strongly of salt.

It was very pretty, this new world, and at first did not seem at all boring. Everything was different from everything else. It was easy to see the difference between dis and dat. But over time, it still became very boring, because nothing ever changed. The different buildings just sat still. The parakeets hung in the sky. The huge waves stood tall but did not crash. And the people still never said “hello my friend,” because they never said anything at all. They never even moved.

Ó discovered that for a world to stay interesting, it can not just look exciting. It also has to be able to change. And to do that, it has to be alive. So ó reached into óself and took out the roaring fire deep inside, and dumped it all over the world. And the world came alive. Suddenly the waves crashed, the people smiled at each other, and the parakeets flew so fast they made little sonic booms. And it was all good. But also very hard work. So ó took a nap. A very long nap. So long, that ó is still napping to this day.

Naps are nice things to have when we are tired, and they help us dream new things to make. But they can also make us sleep right through problems.

And there was a problem. When ó dumped that fire all over the world, there was so much that it ran off all over the place. It fell into the emptiness under the world. It splashed all over the bits and pieces of old dis that ó did not know to clean up. And the dis, like the world, came alive too.

Now, plain dis is a good and useful thing for separating dis from dat. But if bits and pieces of dis come alive, they do not just separate dis from dat. They want, and need, and even love to clip off dis from dat, and clip dis off from dis and dat off from dat. That is why when bits and pieces of dis come alive, they are called clipoffs.

Do not misunderstand me. Clipoffs are not evil. It is just their nature to separate things. They have to. Separateness nourishes them, it is what they eat. And just like us, they like to eat well.

And just like me, they are very lazy. They do not like to feed themselves if they can get us to feed them. They trick us into separating for them, separating everything from everything else and ourselves from each other. So the clipoffs got fatter and fatter still by getting purple corn punch people to turn away from cinnamon persimmon people, and by getting cinnamon persimmon people to think they were *either* cinnamon *or* persimmon people and had to be apart, and by getting the beige people to think they were the most different and best and separate of all.

So people took to fighting each other off a lot. They knocked over each other's flaming towers, sometimes onto the acid green parakeets flying past and the fluorescent striped zebras below. They blew apart each other's mirrored origami flowers, sometimes into the crashing ocean waves to make them sharp with shards of glass, which was not good for the big violet octophants. It is not a pretty story, and you would not like me to describe it any more.

So how does this part of the story end?

I would like to tell that in the end everybody got smart and made the clipoffs go away. Or maybe that everybody taught the clipoffs that saffron ice cream with champa flowers is much more delicious than separation. But I can not, because everybody is still fighting each other, so the clipoffs must still be here and must be getting fatter still. So this story has no end to tell. At least not yet, and not on my own. You must help to tell one.

You can tell it by smiling at others, by calling them “my friend” and reminding them what a beautiful day it is. Or you could tell it differently, by not doing those things. The clipoffs would like that ending best. But I know what ending I like best. So, please do not feed the clipoffs.

TANTRUM THE SECOND, or, Some Worlds are Better Left Unmade.

Most people in most places follow my advice. They try to avoid the clipoffs, always remember to give each other hugs, offer to pick up the check, and do not just leave the garbage for someone else to take out. But there are some places where clipoffs come together and hang out. Maybe it is because all that dis fell straight down, and these are the places that just happened to be underneath. Or maybe it is because even clipoffs need company, no matter how much they hate it once they have it.

The clipoffs even made a place for themselves, long long ago. Well, they more threw one together, really. And it is not so much a place, as an emptiness that happens to be somewhere, because it is not anywhere else. It is more of a black hole than a place. A black hole covered over with packets of stale Caesar salad dressing, and expired medical insurance cards, and empty bottles of Febreze. And pretty maple leaves, more maple leaves than you could possibly imagine. So many that, after a while, you stop seeing them at

all. All so you will not notice the hole, either, and maybe accidentally come too close to it.

But no matter how many leaves and cans and bottles cover up the black hole, it is still a black hole underneath. And that black hole does what all black holes do. A black hole is like a giant vacuum. And like any vacuum, there is only one thing a giant vacuum can do well. It sucks. It sucks a lot. And maybe radiates trace amounts of background heat. But not enough to stop it being freezing cold. That is why the clipoffs covered the hole over, and don't want you to notice it, and want you to accidentally come too close. So you will get sucked in, and become trapped. After all, nobody would ever want to go down there on purpose.

First, the hole sucked in all the beige and grey rubble left strewn about from the collapse of ö's first, failed attempt to make a world. Then, over time, far too many more shabby leftover buildings, and decrepit busses, and tangled powerlines got sucked into the hole, and became stuck and frozen. So it came to look more and more like a city. Sort of. Or more like a dump for bits of cities other cities didn't want anymore. You wouldn't want to live in it. It is hard enough to live well in a dump. It is even harder to live in a dump at the bottom of a black hole.

Only two kinds of creatures can thrive in a city that is a dump in the bottom of a hole. One is called a windigo, and they run the place. The other is called a preta, and they fill all the leftover space the windigos haven't taken for themselves.

A preta is not a very pretty thing. It has a great big belly, just waiting to be filled with anything at all. But it also has a tiny little mouth, on the end of a long narrow proboscis, and there is very little that can fit through that at all.

Except, perhaps, boba tea. Preta mouths are very good at drinking boba tea. Now, there is nothing wrong with boba tea. I like it a lot, especially the purple taro and black sesame and green mango flavors. But nobody can live off boba tea alone. And all the boba tea in the city that is a dump in the black hole's bottom comes in only two flavors. Grey, and beige. And they both taste the same, which is not much of a taste at all. It is not very appetizing. So pretas are always very, very hungry. And because their mouths are so tiny, pretas can barely talk. So they can not ask for anything more or better to eat. And they can never say things like "hello my friend, it's a beautiful day." Which it never is anyway, in a city that is a dump at the bottom of a hole. So pretas are very unfriendly, and very alone, and very clipped off from everything. If you ever see one you will know it is a preta, because no matter what you do it will pretend it does not see you.

Windigo are also always very, very hungry. But their mouths are not small at all. In fact, their mouths are extra-large, because windigo are so hungry that they chew off their own lips. Sometimes even all the way up past their noses. And they will eat anything else, too. You do not want to see one. And you especially do not want one to see you. They look at everything with cold, hungry eyes, and catch it in their cold, long claws, and gobble it down their cold, gaping throats. Even their best friends, if they have any. But you can not have your friends and eat them too, so windigo don't have best friends. This makes their hearts as empty and icy and cold as the dumpy black hole of a city they run. And so they run it by clipping off everything from everything else.

So of course, clipoffs like windigos and pretas very, very much. Or they would, if clipoffs could feel anything for anything else at all. But they can't. So they stopped caring, because they never could care, and they left a long time ago. But the windigos and pretas still like the clipoffs very much, and

miss the clipoffs terribly, and pretend the clipoffs never left, and keep on doing what the clipoffs would have wanted them to do. Which is, clipping things off, to feed the clipoffs that are no longer there.

There is always something to clip off. Play. Fun. And especially love. All these bring things together, and that means less separation, and that would make clipoffs starve. If there were still any clipoffs around. So in the city that is a dump in the bottom of a hole, play and fun and love must be clipped off. Even though all the clipoffs left. It is tradition. And because it is so cleverly camouflaged, and because it sucks so hard and so very much, the dumpy city in the black hole's bottom is always sucking in and trapping something new. Things that love, and play, and have fun, and so have to be clipped. Djinn, for instance. And kirins. And nagas and domovye. But best of all are faeries and pixies. They are full of play, and fun, and wonder and even magic. So, of course, they have to be clipped the most.

Long ago, in darker times, tattle-tale preta would guide windigo hunting parties through the city. They would catch the faeries and pixies, clip off their wings, and leave their bodies in the stagnant lake at the city's edge. But the windigos got smarter, and much less wasteful. Now they put their victims into special reeducation camps. There, faeries and pixies are forced to become administrative assistants, to work in offices cutting things from other things and filing them in boxes and cubicles. This makes them sad and bitter and no fun at all, like all good citizens of a dumpy black hole city should be.

But most important of all are those wings. Cities must be powered by something. Most even have a Department of Power to make sure the something that powers the city keeps powering it. But a dumpy city in the bottom of a hole is different. It must be kept drab and gray and joyless. So it must be disempowered. Otherwise it might warm up. It might stop sucking

like a vacuum. And then all sorts of things might happen. Very, very bad things. Like, for instance, new things. Lively things. Fun things. Change. So long ago, the clipoffs built a mighty disenchantment engine and gave it to the windigo, to disempower the city. To keep it drab and gray and joyless, and always sucking hard. That engine is fueled with the wings of faeries and pixies thrown into the engine's boiler. And the boiler is fired by a great captive dragon, kept underground in chains and fed the worst, most expired Caesar salad and Salisbury steak, all washed down with Clamato juice. That way the dragon is always gassy, so he will constantly belch and fart fire to keep the engine running. The dragon feels terrible and smells even worse, but so would you if you were given nothing but old Caesar salad dressing and Clamato juice.

Now, I will tell you what I know about the disenchantment engine. You will need to know these things.

I know the engine's stokers are the ancient gods of this place, from long before it came to suck so much and hard. After all, you must already have guessed that a place, however bad it has become, could not have always been all that bad. And you did not think that ö was the only god around ever, did you? Tree gods and wind gods, glacier and moon gods, raccoon and rock and turtle gods, beaver gods and even maple tree gods that will let you tap them for syrup. And newer gods too from other places, who passed too close to the hole and got sucked in. A god with eight legs and eight eyes, who used to like to laugh at his own mischief. Another with a fish's tale instead of legs, who feels the pull of the tides and cries for the ocean now too far away. Another with the head of an elephant. And yet another that would look just like a giant snake, if it weren't for all its feathers. The windigo put these gods in chains, and many more too, and make them all work shoveling faerie wings into the fire.

I know the ash and smoke from the engine glitter with super-heated pixie dust. This gives the ancient gods terrible coughs, and chronic cases of sparkle lung. And I know the engine turns the incinerated magic of faerie wings into dis. Lots and lots and lots of dis.

You already know now that dis can be a very useful thing. And you know that with too little dis, everything gives up and falls apart. But too much dis is at least as bad. And that is what a disenchantment engine makes: too much dis. So much too much dis, and the worst kinds too. Dis-trust and dis-affect, dis-taste and dis-honesty and dis-sembling. To separate dis from dat, and her from her and him from him and her from him and them from us, and you from me and also even you from yourself, over and over and over again. Just like the clipoffs want. Even though they all left a long time ago.

And now, I will tell you what I do not know about the disenchantment engine.

I wish I could tell you how some brave heroes, just like you, found the disenchantment engine and destroyed it forever. But I do not know of any such thing. And I do not even know where the engine is hidden. So again I have no ending. And again, you will have to help me make one.

First, you must be the hero. Then, you must find the engine and destroy it. And remember to free the dragon, and then take him for ice cream. He will like that, very much. I would do it for you but, remember, I am very lazy.

Do you know the tall ugly concrete spike thrust through the heart of the city? Maybe the engine is deep beneath that. Or maybe it is hidden deep in a subway station, the one named Saint George might be a good place to lock up

a dragon. Or maybe it is scattered all over the streets, in little abandoned factories and dusty warehouses and rotting houses. But what I really think is this: I think the engine is deep inside every windigo and preta, in their heads and chests, where their hearts and souls should be.

Do not worry, finding the engine will not be so hard. You will find it by the smell. It stinks. Like burnt faerie wings, and scorched pixie dust, and dragon farts and stale Caesar salad dressing and despair, all covered over with Febreze.

So when you find someone who stinks like that you have found a preta, or a windigo, and so also the engine. You must not let them stay hungry, and alone, and separate. And although they will try very hard, do not let them ignore you, and especially do not let them catch and eat you. But calling them “my friend” will not do the job, it is not nearly enough. Not here. You must slap them upside their heads or maybe kick them in their butts, where their souls should be. Hard. That should stop the engine. Then, you must give them a big hug. And maybe, just maybe, that will start their hearts again.

The end.