

How will humans survive in the wake of societal and environmental calamity caused by the imbalance between human desires and the earth's capacity to sustain those desires? Oasis Tales of the Conjuror is a life-affirming response to this question.

Oasis Tales of the Conjuror: and other stories

By Todd Walton

Order the book from the publisher [Booklocker.com](https://www.booklocker.com)

<https://www.booklocker.com/p/books/11418.html?s=pdf>

**or from your favorite neighborhood
or online bookstore.**

The background of the cover is a watercolor-style illustration. The top half shows a desert landscape with several palm trees in shades of grey and brown. Below the trees is a sandy dune in a golden-brown color. The bottom half of the cover is dominated by a large, textured area of blue, representing a body of water or a sky, with some lighter blue and greenish-blue washes. The text is overlaid on this background.

Oasis Tales
of the Conjuror
and other stories

Todd Walton

Other Books by Todd Walton

Inside Moves

Forgotten Impulses

Louie & Women

Night Train

Ruby & Spear

Open Body: Creating Your Own Yoga

The Writer's Path

Buddha In A Teacup

Under the Table Books

Little Movies

Copyright 2020 by Todd Walton

All rights reserved under international and Pan-American Copyright Convention. No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written permission from the publisher, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in articles and reviews.

Published by Under The Table Books 2020

Print ISBN: 978-1-64719-030-9

Epub ISBN: 978-1-64719-031-6

Mobi ISBN: 978-1-64719-032-3

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Walton, Todd

Oasis Tales of the Conjuror and other stories

by Todd Walton

Mendocino: Under the Table Books [2020]

Literature/science fiction novella and stories, American

Library of Congress Control Number: 2020921814

The characters and events in this book are fictitious. Any similarity to real persons, living or dead, is coincidental and not intended by the author.

Cover Design by Todd Engel

Under the Table Books

P.O. Box 366

Mendocino CA

Printed on acid-free paper.

Contents

Oasis Tales of the Conjuror.....	1
Oasis.....	5
Conjuror.....	6
Figs.....	7
Messenger.....	12
Voices.....	20
The Marsh.....	22
Marriage.....	28
Mercy.....	31
Home.....	37
The Wilds.....	45
Letters.....	52
Tokens.....	58
New World.....	65
Chance.....	73
Land.....	79
Children.....	84
Healing.....	90
Babies.....	96
Genius.....	103

Todd Walton

Magic.....	109
Other Beings.....	113
Other Stories	115
The Golden Light	116
Of Water and Melons.....	150
When Is It Done?	162
Clumsy Booby	166
About the Author	183

Oasis

In a land where the rainy season lasts four moons and drought rules nine, the tiny paradise possesses both abundant water and fertile soil. Cradled by rugged mountains to the west and north and east, with a vast desert lapping her southern fringe, the oasis and her six hundred citizens are loosely allied to the city of Tropolis, a hundred miles to the north.

A wall of stone twenty-feet-high and four-feet-thick encloses the oasis entirely, save for a breach in the containment at the southeast corner where waters of the marsh flow into the desert. This great wall was completed fifty years ago in the aftermath of a terrible war, and though the ramparts have yet to be tested by any foe, the people of the oasis are glad for the illusion of security and the very real barrier the wall provides against the fierce desert winds.

Nearly all the land of the oasis, three square miles, is cultivated. Only the seventy-acre marsh and four massive granite outcroppings are kept free of human interference for the benefit of fish and insects and rodents and tortoises and lizards and snakes and birds.

Conjurer

Anza the conjurer is fifty-nine, handsome and lean, a masterful guitarist, his brown hair turning gray. He is a widower and lives alone. His daughters Serena and Luno left the oasis five years ago to seek their fortunes as singers in Tropolis. Luno has a child named Desai, a boy much loved by his grandfather. Serena has yet to give birth.

Anza's commodious house overlooks his three acres of ground. One acre is wild, a haven for birds and bees and tangles of wild vines and fourteen promising oak trees. One acre is given to grapes that Anza trades to Tul for the making of wine. And one acre is given to fruit and nut trees—apricots, apples, almonds, walnuts, and plums—and to a garden of vegetables and flowers and amaranth. Anza also keeps quail for eggs, rabbits for meat and pelts.

The conjurer's supreme wish is for Serena, Luno, and Desai to leave Tropolis and come live with him in the oasis.

Figs

One morning in the first days of the dry time, old man Chesha, short and stout and stiff-legged, mounts his skinny donkey and rides from his home at the northern end of the oasis to visit Anza in the south. Chesha intends to hire the conjuror to cure his fig trees of an invisible malady. To pay for the conjuring he will give Anza three ounces of black tea, a valuable offering. Chesha is renowned for his stinginess. Thus giving Anza three ounces of black tea will be a most painful sacrifice for the old miser.

“Stone and lumber,” mutters Chesha, frowning at Anza’s house of oak and brick. “They say his house stays cool on the hottest days, while my hovel of twigs cooks me cruelly. I might as well have no house at all. See how rich he grows from conjuring. I work from morning until night to make ends meet, while he waves his hand and gifts rain down on him.”

A black cat sits in a patch of sunlight on Anza’s threshold, gazing curiously at the old man on the donkey.

“Anza,” shouts Chesha, disdainful of those who keep pets. “I have tea for you, but I will only pay if...”

“Welcome, my friend,” says Anza, appearing in his doorway. “What brings you so far?”

“I think you know,” says Chesha, fearing to look at the conjuror. “My fig trees. The fruit is late. Very late. You knew I was coming, didn’t you?”

“I’m a conjuror,” says Anza, smiling at the old man. “Not a seer.”

“Will you conjure for me?” asks Chesha, whimpering. “If my trees won’t fruit I’m ruined.”

“I will come at dusk,” says Anza, gazing at the cloudless sky. “But before I arrive, you must water your orchard and leave a cup of wine under each of the trees.”

“Seventeen cups?” cries Chesha. “Are you mad? I am not rich. I live in a hovel. I work from morning until night to make...”

“A cup of wine for each tree, my friend,” says Anza, closing his eyes. “And water your trees deeply else the cure will fail.”

Δ

Chesha rides home in a fury, whipping his donkey with a bamboo stick. “Seventeen cups. Seventeen! I have but two cups in my house. Where am I to get fifteen more cups in which to pour the wine? I have the wine, but it’s meant for me, not to be wasted on trees.”

The truth, however, trumps the old man’s outrage, for Chesha is the second wealthiest citizen of the oasis, a notorious glutton and a guzzler of three and four bottles of wine every day. What’s more, his fortune is derived entirely from the sale of his fabulous figs. No other fig trees in the oasis bear so heavily or produce such delicious fruit, though Chesha has never watered or fed them. And no one knows how old his trees are, for none among the living was alive when the magnificent trees were planted.

Chesha, who never married, inherited his house and five acres from his Aunt Bysar when he was thirty, a bequest that made him rich beyond his wildest imaginings. His figs bring buyers from near and far, and

his days are filled with bargaining and selling and counting his gains.

But now the fruit is late emerging, very late, and for the first time in his life Chesha faces the prospect of poverty. So the old miser purchases fifteen clay cups from Uma the potter and irrigates his orchard, though it pains him to spend water he might otherwise sell to his neighbors.

When at last Chesha has placed a cup of wine near each of his trees, he shakes his gnarly fist at the golden horizon and grumbles, "There. I have done what the conjuror demanded. Now he must work his magic and bring me greater gains than ever before."



Tambourines and drums announce the coming of Anza at the head of a procession of seventeen people.

"What is this?" splutters Chesha, sneering at the conjuror. "I hired *you*, Anza. Not these others. This is no wedding. My trees are dying."

"I have come to conjure," says Anza, bowing to the fig trees. "These good people are my helpers, one for each of your trees."

And the people go into the orchard and take up the cups.

"What are they doing?" cries Chesha, stamping his feet. "How dare they drink my wine?"

Anza raises his hand to silence the old man. "If my conjuring is to succeed, your trees must all drink in the same moment."

"If these people pour my wine into the ground and my trees do not fruit," says Chesha, glowering at Anza, "I will give you nothing."

"And if the fruit emerges?" asks Anza, smiling slyly. "Then what will you give?"

"Three ounces of black tea," says Chesha, gritting his teeth. "We bargained so this morning. You agreed to come for that price and that is what I will pay, but only if...."

"I agreed to come," says Anza, nodding slowly. "But I will require more than three ounces of tea to ease the malady of these trees."

"How much?" cries Chesha, wringing his hands. "I am a poor man. Without my figs, I will starve."

"But if your trees give forth their bounty, you will be rich. So I ask you, my friend, to give one of every four of your figs to these people who are not so fortunate as you, and to give them a quarter of your harvest for the rest of your life."

"These people?" says Chesha, glancing furtively at the men and women. "Who are they that I should give them my figs?"

"Your brothers and sisters," says Anza, raising his hands to the sky. "Now I will conjure. Are we agreed on the price?"

"Brothers and sisters? They lie! I have no brothers or sisters."

"Then we will go," says Anza, beckoning to his helpers. "We will leave you to your cups of wine and your barren trees."

"Wait!" cries Chesha, terrified. "I agree. One of every four figs to these people. For the rest of my life. Now conjure and save my trees."

Anza gestures for his helpers to give the wine to the trees, and as the precious liquid seeps into the ground, Anza falls to his knees and presses his forehead to the ground.

Now the trees begin to shiver and rattle as if swept by a powerful wind as thousands of tiny green orbs emerge on the branches and the air grows sweet with the scent of divinity.

Anza weeps convulsively, for he has conjured the terrible sorrow of the ancient trees, abused by Chesha for fifty years, though they never failed to give him their fruit.

Messenger

Lev is eleven, a big strong boy with brown hair and dark green eyes. Known as the boy who loves stories, he is forever asking people to tell him tales so he might write the good ones down. Lev has traveled away from the oasis twice in his life, once with his father to Tropolis to sell almonds, and once with his mother to visit her sister in the farming commune on the shores of Blue Lake, seventeen miles to the south.

Marga is ten, tall for her age, with light brown hair kept in a braid, her eyes the blue of morning sky. Known for her lovely voice, she is the youngest member of the women's choir at Southgate. She has never traveled away from the oasis and is not greatly drawn to the outside world.

Every few days, Lev and Marga walk from their school at Eastern Plaza to Northgate to visit Lev's godfather, Tornio, the watchman of the northern gateway and the seventh oldest citizen of the oasis.



The children stand on the threshold of the gateway, scanning the hills for dust clouds presaging a bus or truck or caravan. Seeing no sign of anyone approaching the oasis, they knock on the open door of the gatehouse and Tornio invites them into his little room.

Tornio is tall and skinny with bony fingers and a hooked nose, his gray eyes ringed with wrinkles gained from a lifetime of squinting at the bright horizon. He

loves visits from the children, for they break the monotony of long days in which he has little to do.

As is his custom, Lev requests that Tornio read the day's entries from the gatehouse log. Happy to oblige, the old gatekeeper dons spindly reading glasses, straddles the creaky stool behind his desk, and places his finger at the top of the page.

"Here we are. Late morning of the third day of the fifth moon of the dry season. I was roused from my review of yesterday's entries by the screeching of a hawk, she who nests in the wall some sixty yards west of the gate. She is an exquisite raptor, seven years old, with splendid red tail feathers and exceptionally long legs. I have taken the liberty of naming her Twyla for I once knew a woman named Twyla, a dancer with long legs. Given there are no Twylas among the current population of the oasis I foresee no difficulties arising from my giving the hawk this name. Twyla is often away hunting, for she has two fledglings to feed and I fear her mate has fallen to feather hunters, which means she is solely responsible for the feeding of her ravenous offspring. No easy task, I'm sure.

"At the sound of her cry, I took up my telescope and espied a telltale dust cloud. By its volume and density, I surmised this mass of dust to be the creation of the bus from Tropolis. My surmise proved correct. Bus #7 (twelve seats) driven by Alix Inger, badge number 174, is sounding quite unwell these days, like a person with a raspy cough. When I mentioned the rasping to Alix, he replied, "This old gal needs an overhaul, but what can we do with the shortages and all?"

"I remarked to Alix that he had inadvertently made a rhyme, but he gave no indication he grasped my meaning. I discerned he was vexed from his long journey, though

he reported no difficulties en route and said he expected none on the return trip *if* the bus did not break down.

“The conveyance disgorged seven oasis residents returning from Tropolis. They reported success in trading raisins, dates, oranges, and figs for a variety of staples, notably flour, rice, and tea. Baza came home with two young parakeets, yellow with orange breasts, lively and full of song. The parakeets, that is, not Baza, though Baza is certainly lively and a fine singer.

“As is his custom, Alix parked in the shade and slept for two hours. He then ate his breakfast and sounded his horn to announce his departure. Three people boarded the outgoing bus, each carrying sacks of oranges that are commanding excellent trade in Tropolis what with the shortages.

“Alix saluted me as he drove out the gate and drove slowly until he was clear of the oasis so as not to stir up too much dust hereabouts. Alix is a most considerate driver.”

Lev gazes out the window, the far hills displaying dramatic afternoon shadows. “Maybe I will be a bus driver. Wouldn’t it be exciting to drive across the plain and over the hills to Tropolis and back again?”

“Are there more entries?” asks Marga, smiling wistfully.

“No,” replies Tornio, taking off his glasses. “Only the morning bus.”

“Do you think anyone else will come today?” asks Lev, wishing he didn’t have to go home and milk the goats. “When the sky grows pink, caravans seek stopping places for the night. So says a poem we learned in school.”

“No telling,” says Tornio, placing a tin kettle on his iron stove. “I will make for us a pot of tea to share and then

you, Lev, must tend to your goats, and you, Marga, must weed your vegetables.”

Marga nudges Lev, for Tornio only serves them tea when he has a story to tell.

“I was born eighty-three years ago,” he begins, nodding to affirm the magnitude of the number. “In Tropolis. The great famine having ended four years before my birth.”

“How did the famine end?” asks Marga, never having known hunger.

“Slowly but surely the outlying communes were able to grow enough food for everyone,” says Tornio, continuing to nod. “And, of course, there were not so many people to feed, the famine having taken two of every three people.”

“Two of every three,” says Lev, awestruck by the power of death. “Imagine if two of us suddenly disappeared.”

“I can imagine,” says Tornio, dropping mint leaves into a yellow teapot. “The famine resumed when I was seven and my family ate little for two years. Many of our neighbors died. But this is not the story I wish to tell.”

“May we never know famine,” says Lev, reaching into his sack and bringing forth a small chunk of candy. He breaks the morsel in two and gives one piece to Marga, one to Tornio.

The old man grins at the boy. “Blessings and thanks for your generosity.”

“Blessings and thanks to you,” says Lev, smiling at his godfather. “And for the tea we are about to drink and the story you are about to tell.”

“Yes, yes,” says Tornio, snatching up the kettle and dousing the mint to sweeten the air with scented steam.

"Blessings and thanks," says Marga, popping the candy into her mouth. "Which story *do* you wish to tell, Tornio?"

"How I came to live in the oasis," says Tornio, adding a pinch of chamomile to the brew. "When I was not much older than you, Lev."

The children exchange frowns of wonder, for though Tornio has spoken many times of his birth in Tropolis, they have never imagined him as anything other than the old watchman of Northgate who lives with his wife Ahdi in a stone house on the edge of Tul's olive grove.

"When I was fourteen," says Tornio, pouring tea into three black cups, "I was the swiftest of runners."

Lev and Marga snicker, for oasis children are often admonished for their tardiness with the expression *Slow as Tornio*.

"Oh, I know," says the old man, chuckling. "I'm an ancient tortoise now, but when I was fourteen I won the race around the outer walls of Tropolis. Thirteen miles. Against the swiftest men and women. Indeed, my victory gained the attention of the ruling council." He nods slowly, savoring the memory of his triumph. "Remember, children, this was before the revival of engines, when everything was carried by mules and on our backs, not in buses or trucks. And the most important messages were entrusted to the fastest runners."

"They paid you to run?" asks Lev, dazzled by the thought. "Now that would be a dream come true."

"Hard work," says Tornio, clearing his throat. "When the war came, I ran many miles back and forth between Tropolis and our forward army."

"What enemy were you fighting?" asks Marga, having only recently heard about the war from her mother.

“Peoples of the north,” says Tornio, his voice falling to a whisper. “People just like you and me. Their crops failed. So they came south to take food from Tropolis and her allies.”

“Thousands of people died,” says Lev, repeating the words his father spoke but a few nights ago.

“Yes,” says Tornio, nibbling his candy. “And there came a decisive battle won by the army of Tropolis and the peoples of the north were annihilated, save for two hundred who rushed southward to *this* oasis.”

“They came here?” asks Lev, his heart pounding.

“They came here,” echoes Tornio, gazing out the window to the north. “You are finally of an age to hear the truth. Until now we have not wished to disturb your childhood with such fearful history.”

Marga reaches for Lev’s hand as he reaches for hers.

“So...” says Tornio, grimacing at the memory, “the rulers ordered me to outrun the invaders and rouse the people of the oasis to fight until the army of Tropolis could arrive.”

The children hold their breaths, for as the old man speaks they seem to hear the starving people fast approaching.

“I ran those hundred miles in less than a day,” says Tornio, closing his tired eyes, “arriving just in time to warn the people of what was coming. And the battle did rage for three days and nights until the army of Tropolis came to kill the last of those poor peoples of the north.”

“Here?” says Marga, sobbing. “Those people were killed here?”

Tornio nods gravely. “I was badly wounded and lingered on the edge of death for many days. But the people of the oasis would not allow me to die. When I

recovered, I helped build the walls that protect us now. When the walls were complete, I was given work in the vineyards, and when I married Ahdi we were given our house and two acres on the edge of Tul's olive grove. And when I grew too old to labor in the vineyards, I was given this job, for I saved the people of the oasis by running those terrible hundred miles."

Δ

Walking home from the gatehouse, Marga says to Lev, "I wonder why our people didn't share their food with the peoples of the north?"

"Perhaps there were too many of them," says Lev, wondering the same. "Even now there are people here in the oasis who don't have enough food. Think of Nori and how we share our school snacks with him to quell his hunger. Imagine two hundred more without food. There would surely be famine."

"And two of every three of us would perish," whispers Marga, stunned by the thought of such enormous loss.

"There are six hundred acres within the walls of the oasis," says Lev, stopping at the entrance to Marga's yard where a dozen citrus trees shade the garden of vegetables and herbs. "With three hundred acres under cultivation and nearly six hundred people to feed. My father says we are too many by at least a hundred."

"That's why Anza's daughters moved away," says Marga, nodding, "because the council decreed no new children may be born here until at least fifty people die."

"Who do you think will die next?" asks Lev, taking Marga's hand.

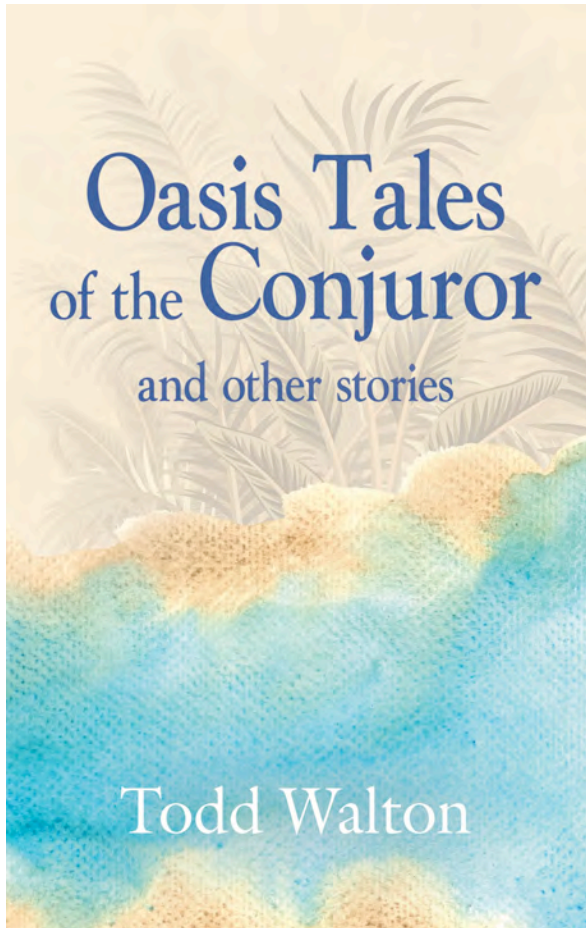
Oasis Tales of the Conjuror and other stories

“I don’t want to think about death,” says Marga, wrinkling her nose and shaking her head. “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow,” says Lev, kissing Marga’s hand. “May your dreams be full of wonder.”

About the Author

Todd Walton is the author of the acclaimed novels and short story collections *Inside Moves*, *Forgotten Impulses*, *Louie & Women*, *Ruby & Spear*, *Buddha In A Teacup*, *Under the Table Books*, and *Little Movies*. His many music CDs include *Lounge Act In Heaven*, *Dream Of You*, *Mystery Inventions*, and *Incongroovity*. Todd's web site is UnderTheTableBooks.com



How will humans survive in the wake of societal and environmental calamity caused by the imbalance between human desires and the earth's capacity to sustain those desires? Oasis Tales of the Conjuror is a life-affirming response to this question.

Oasis Tales of the Conjuror: and other stories

By Todd Walton

Order the book from the publisher [Booklocker.com](https://www.booklocker.com)

<https://www.booklocker.com/p/books/11418.html?s=pdf>

**or from your favorite neighborhood
or online bookstore.**