

Oasis

a short story by
Louis Greenberg

GIBRALTAR
WORDWORKS 

Set in a near-future when water is sold for profit, "Oasis" charts the first, quiet step in an epic journey.

Jame, a child with remarkable abilities, is being smuggled out of Europe to join a revolution in Mali. The story is narrated by the reluctant guardian who's helping Jame on his first step, through security in the Geneva airport.

"Oasis" is told with an adapted scheme of non-gendered nouns and pronouns.

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“**D**eclare your liquids. It is an offence under the Water Control Act to conceal...”

Even the recorded voice sounded bored. The announcement played every three minutes and twenty seconds, looped in a regular series between “Thank you for choosing Pure Geneva Airport” and “Report all suspicious articles.” Normally I’d have ignored it and let the voice blend into the thrum and bustle of the departures terminal, but it was oddly provocative that morning. I felt an angry blush burning my cheeks.

“You all right?” Jame asked, hitching eir backpack further onto eir shoulder, and I knew that if even e’d picked up on my irritation, I’d better get myself in check. I took a deep breath, forcing back a cough that raked its way up my throat. I scanned the passport-control hall with bulging eyes for any switch in attention, the slightest twitch of a head, a movement of a hand beneath a jacket.

“I’m fine,” I said, but had to clear my throat again.

“Do you need some water?” e asked.

My gut lurched. “Jesus, Jame,” I whispered. “Not here.”

E looked up at me with such a perfect pre-teen *do-you-really-think-I’m-that-stupid* sneer that I had to laugh. “I meant Pure,” e said, pointing out the bank of Pure Water dispensers with their ubiquitous sky-blue and leaf-green yin-yang logos.

It was a tempting offer. I was thirsty; I hadn’t had anything to drink since the night before. Ally’s fever had nudged up to forty despite the medication, and I’d had to use Lib’s tag to fill up my smartbottle and douse eir face cloth in Premium to cool eir forehead. I hadn’t wanted to take any chances on Standard, especially after that graze on eir knee had got re-infected. I knew that Lib’s charity was soon going to wear thin, but I still didn’t know when I’d next get paid. So the sight of those green and blue curling fish, those water-drop lovers, made my tongue tacky. But of course I couldn’t accept Jame’s offer. I’d have some Standard when I got thirsty enough. “Thanks,” I said, “but I’m fine.”

“You sure? I’ve got Premium credits. I won’t need them where I... I suppose.”

“Of course you’re going to need them. You’ll be back soon. You’ll use them then.” I put all my energy into convincing myself so that I could sound convincing to ir. I think it worked, because e shrugged, hitched eir backpack and flipped eir headphones back on, staring ahead with a twelve-year-old’s trainee nonchalance as the queue shuffled forward. I expected that we’d be stopped at one of many hurdles between the train to the airport and the boarding gate, and my strategy was to nurture a sense of resignation. I didn’t know Jame, I owed ir nothing; I was doing ir a favour – ir and eir parent, and the science teacher who’d identified that e was a Maker in the first place. Either way it was nothing really to do with me,

just a couple of days' work escorting ir out of Switzerland, out of Europe, into the uncontrolled zone. I'd heard of the Oasis group in the course of my work, knew that Makers had been smuggled out to the noncompliant zone to join them in their resistance against the Pure Water monopoly, but to be honest, I hadn't seen the effects of any resistance. I don't know if it was because the net of propaganda was so tight here, but Oasis was a non-entity in the general Swiss and European consciousness. Resistance didn't exist; Pure Water wanted us all to believe there was nothing to resist.

"I don't even work there anymore," I'd told the teacher when e called. "Liquid Advocacy International has been defunded. It's been shut down for eight months already."

"So why did you answer the phone?" e said.

"I have my own child; I don't need to put ir at risk," I complained. We both knew I'd help, though I had no idea why.

I'd been surprised when we made it past the check-in counter, the operative there barely glancing at us as e scanned our passports and registered that we only carried two small backpacks between us. I was sure they were onto us. I fully expected someone to emerge out of the crowd, discreetly clamp our arms behind us, and take Jame off wherever the government takes Makers. Letting us through check-in was probably just a step in their plan: to make us complacent, put us off our guard; allow us to incriminate ourselves. Now our treason would be recorded on their computer system before they arrested us at the passport check.

I'd escorted people out of the country before. But never a child; never a Maker. To be honest, I wasn't entirely sure I believed that Makers existed before I met Jame, and I still hadn't seen ir Making. It's not my business, I reminded myself; it hasn't been my business for eight months.

That's what I tried to tell myself, but I failed.

Of course I knew why I was doing it. For Ally. For Ally's future, and for every child who hopes to live a life of choice.

I try not to think what things were like when I was a kid, but lately I find myself going back there, taking long, deep baths in the memories. I remember my parents sending me out to play and we'd come back muddy-kneed and shredded up and they'd open up the tap and let Premium pour as they splashed it all over us. Safety, home, loving smiles, like an advertisement.

Just as well, I get snapped out of my self-indulgent reverie by the waft – it's their smell that confronts me first: cheap deodorant, Exelia softener on their uniform, leather polish, gun oil and sweat; one of them has halitosis – of three black-clad Special Security soldiers pushing up the line behind us.

This is it, I thought. I'm sorry I failed you so soon, Jame.

They were nudging up behind me, the queue rippling with stifled sighs and reluctant shuffles, eyes microscopically rolled, the most profound protest we good citizens could muster against tyranny.

Tyranny. What sort of old-fashioned, radical language was that? *This is why I'm in this position, now*, I thought; and exactly why I shouldn't be. It's not safe to play at politics anymore. I drew closer to Jame, shielding ir. They'll sniff ir out, surely. I put my hand on eir shoulder, pretending to be just a parent with eir child, warding ir out of harm's way. Jame had eir earphones on, staring vacantly up at the advertising screens, nodding eir head to the rhythm, tapping eir foot. E so successfully made irself invisible, just another inconsequential kid, that as the soldiers shoved by, I knew that Jame was smarter than e let on.

"You do that on purpose, don't you?" I said to ir once they'd gone, leaning close in to eir face.

“Do what?” e said, with a small twist of self-satisfaction. Of course there was no music playing in the headphones.

The Special Security trio had stationed themselves against a pillar, watching the passport queues. As subtly as I could, I glanced at them as we proceeded, but I had the sense they were looking for somebody else right then – their gazes seemed trained half a metre above Jame’s head – or maybe they just wanted me to believe that. They’re going to stop us, I told myself again in an effort to control my breathing. It’s inevitable. It won’t be my fault. Jame will be all right. I tried not to think of Ally. E loves Lib; they’d be all right on their own.

Then we were ushered up to a free window. I handed over our passports.

“Where are you travelling?” the officer asked me, but e was looking at Jame.

“Mindelo, Cape Verde. Vacation with relatives.”

“What’s your relationship to the child?”

“I’m eir guardian. I am escorting ir on eir parent’s behalf.”

The officer scrutinised me, knowing that nobody would try to get away with a lie like that, especially travelling so close to the noncompliant nations. “You have the parent’s authorisation?”

I removed the sheaf of documents from my backpack, concentrating on keeping my face relaxed.

The officer scanned carefully through the forms, correctly filed and notarised, with necessary the affidavits and certified copies of all the relevant identity cards and passports. Finding nothing out of order, e turned to Jame, who was picking an invisible something out of eir teeth. “Are you looking forward to your vacation?”

“Yes, M.” I worried that Jame was laying the politeness on

a little thick, but the officer seemed charmed, smiling back.

“How long will you stay?”

“Two weeks.”

“And where are you staying? On Sal?” A test. There’s nothing much for tourists to do on Sal, apart from hang out at the transit airport or work in the salt mines. If Jame had said e was holidaying on Sal, it would have been as good as an admission that e was simply using it as a waystation to be smuggled by boat into Mauritania and through to the Oasis enclave in Mali.

“Oh, no.” Jame smiled. “My cousin Ariel has a house on Santo Antão and all my relatives are getting together. We’re just going to chill, hike, swim. I love to swim.”

The officer shrugged – e’d tried, but there was no real reason to stop us. “Enjoy yourself,” e said to Jame as e stamped and returned our documents. E waved us through. I glanced behind me, but the Special Security soldiers had disappeared.

“Good work,” I said, as we found a couple of seats in the waiting area. “But that swimming quip. Are you trying to get caught?”

“But that was a passport person,” e said, “not police or Security or anyone from Pure Water. Why would e care what I say about swimming?”

“They’re all connected,” I said, my voice too loud, then I sat down next to ir, levelling my tone. “The government agencies work hand-in-glove with the corporations. You don’t think that...” But I stopped. I realised I sounded like a paranoid delusional. Let Jame keep eir innocence for a moment longer.

E shrugged and pouted, and started fiddling with eir phone. I stared at ir, really taking ir in for the first time since I’d collected ir that morning. Loose black hair, grown devil-may-care; jeans, sneakers, Manor T-shirt, casual hooded jacket –

any twelve-year-old, anywhere. Except that face, streaked with intelligence beyond eir years, confidence burning out of those honey-brown eyes. When e smiled, it was almost a snarl. There was a power there, behind eir generic disguise, something I knew would be hard to control.

And those fingers, stained grey on the forefinger and middle finger of each hand; the Maker's brand, I suspected. I'd heard about it, seen it happen on poor-quality video, but never in real life. I'm not sure I fully understood it.

E noticed me staring at eir hands and folded them over eir lap.

"So how do you do it?"

E shot me a side-eye. "I thought you said I shouldn't do it here."

"Of course you shouldn't," I said. "I'm just asking how it works."

"I don't know. It's just... there's an agent and a reagent and a catalyst. The agent and the reagent aren't particularly uncommon. What's really surprising is that it's so rare – we're all made of water, after all. The difference is," – and here e betrayed enough self-awareness to glance behind ir and lower eir voice – "that we, Makers, can spontaneously produce the catalyst in the right form. That's how my parent explained it to me anyway. It's in our genes... and in our hormones. That's why only a few of us can do it, and only at a certain age." This was the first time Jame had mentioned eir parent the whole morning. Really I hadn't expected ir to confide about eir parent to a stranger like me, but still eir peculiar calmness was unsettling to me. It was as if e was just going off to school or the shops. As if this were an everyday outing.

"I've seen it on a video. It looks like magic."

E straightened eir back. "It's not magic," e snapped. "It's

science.”

“It bothers you, doesn’t it? That you have the ...” – *power* would sound too comic-book – “the skill?”

E locked eir eyes on the advertising screens in front of us. A Pure Water ad was playing: glistening waterfalls, forests, bright-coloured birds.

“I can understand,” I said. “It must be difficult. Why does it have to be you?” My thoughts turned to Ally. If e were a Maker, if I had to send ir away from me, I’d... well, I didn’t know what I’d do.

For a long moment, Jame said nothing. I thought e was done with the conversation, so I leant across to pick up a magazine someone had discarded two seats over from me. But then e said, “It’s not the worst thing in the world to be able to do this.” The words sounded rehearsed, as if they were something eir parent had told ir. I nodded. “But I don’t know what it’s for,” e added, eir voice at last crackling minutely around the edges. “I want it to mean something, you know.”

I didn’t want to lie, so I said nothing. Even though I wasn’t sure that it was the right thing to do, I reached out and squeezed ir on the leg. This reassurance would probably mean nothing after all. I mean, we weren’t going to get on this plane. Jame would get caught and Pure Water’s stock would continue on its never-ending ascent. Nothing would change. After twenty years of working in polite social activism and advocacy, constantly eroded away until there was nothing left of us, the only certainty I retained was that individuals were powerless.

There was a café opposite us with a scarlet rope barrier across its entranceway and a hefty waiter apportioning welcomes. Beyond ir, in plain sight, rich businesspeople and trust-fund babies sat drinking sparkling Premium-based

drinks in Premium-ice-filled glasses. The café was decorated in sky blue and leaf green, the brand colours of a luxurious slake. The needle inside my throat turned to a rusty nail and the more I tried to suppress the cough, the more it burnt, until I had to hack it out in a gasping choke.

“Come on,” Jame said. “Let me get you some water.”

“No, thanks.”

“I’m thirsty. I’m going to get some anyway.”

I watched ir walk across to the nearest dispenser, fit eir smartbottle to the nozzle and swipe eir tag. The dispenser spat out no more than two hundred mils.

“You’re out of credits, aren’t you?” I said when e came back.

E sighed in a way that sounds wrong from a twelve-year-old. “Have this, please. You know I don’t need it.”

“Actually, no, I don’t know that. I only have an e-mail your school teacher sent to the organisation and a second-hand report from your parent.”

E jutted eir hip. “So you think I’m a con artist scamming my way into a free trip to Mali so—”

“*Ssh!* For God’s sake, Jame!”

E was embarrassed. That was a slip e shouldn’t have made. “Sorry.” E dumped the bottle down next to ir.

“No, I’m sorry.” I said. “You’re just being kind and I’m being rude.” But e hadn’t heard me because eir headphones were back on. This time there was a beat hissing out of them.

The screens were now playing the airport’s redacted version of the news, with anything potentially panic-inducing edited out. They wanted to keep the passengers in here bored, compliant, half-asleep, before they herded us onto our planes.

I gathered the magazine – a copy of *Proud*, one of those glossy advertorials masquerading as a lifestyle magazine – and started flipping through it. I wasn’t especially surprised

to see the pinched, tanned face of Frances Brabeck fronting a feature. As if in duty to my past life, I dipped into the article, trying to block out the noise of competing soundtracks and announcements and shrieking kids and rattling trolleys around me.

“As we’ve stated repeatedly before, we offer fully subsidised Standard Water to non-subscribers, even among non-compliant nations.”

It was a blatant PR exercise between the magazine – loyally funded by Pure Water advertising – and Brabeck. E’d uttered another volley of regrettable things in the wake of the latest round of protests from the uncontrolled zone. Protests that had achieved nothing.

I could almost hear the interviewer’s breathlessness in the questions. “And what would you say to protesters and civil organisations who allege that increases in cholera and gastrointestinal diseases stem from failings in Pure Water’s treatment of their Standard Water offerings to those countries?”

“We say that the complaints are unfounded.” Brabeck trotted out the lines e’d spun so often before. “As you know, the United Nations, in their wisdom, has declared water a right. And although it is not our job as Pure Water to supply free water to the world’s exploding population, we yet work hard to subsidise the requirements of as many citizens as possible. This is our philanthropic offering to the global community. We are grateful to live and operate in a free market, and India, Venezuela, or any other nation is free to follow the example of other third-world regimes to try to source and purify their own water. Unfortunately, they may well find that their own efforts will fall short of their frankly unreasonable expectations. Pure Water offers the people of the world acceptably clean water at below cost; we invite all nations to benefit from our centuries

of experience and our world-leading infrastructure.”

On the next page, another shot of Brabeck, doing his best to soften those narrow eyes at the camera, like one of those smug old people on an ancient cigarette advertisement, the Pure Water logo boldly over his left shoulder. I flipped the magazine aside and watched the Premium-drinkers in their café. *Acceptably clean*. Sure, if you find the taste of shit and bleach acceptable.

Maybe my memories are gilded, but I'm sure everyone had Premium in those days, for free, piped in from underground, dams and reservoirs. We'd take baths in Premium, and I swear I can remember that some normal citizens even had holes in their gardens filled up with Premium. No, that can't be. It must be a story I heard when I was small. Holes in private gardens, full of Premium. I don't think so.

“Just boarded, love,” I texted to Ally. “Be good for Lib.” I started typing *See you in a week*, but I was cut short by a pain in my eyes which made them sting and run. It was only when my chest tried to implode, when I struggled to catch my breath, that I realised my body was remembering what it was like to cry. That, or having a panic attack. Or both.

I'd convinced myself that we wouldn't get on this plane, that I would be back home with Ally by the evening, but now I was strapped into a narrow seat next to Jame, who I was vaguely aware was trying to talk to me, but it was all I could do to keep curled into myself, my head down, my hands clasping my phone on my lap; all I could do not to jump and scream and flee.

When the phone vibrated, I thought it was because I'd broken it, but I managed to force open an eyelid and squint at the screen.

Ally: “I will. Lib’s going to take me to the pet expo when I’m better. Have fun! xx”

My sweet Ally. E’d be all right. Ally’d always been fine when I’d travelled before, looking forward to the presents I’d bring back. But I’d never escorted a Maker.

“You get better soon, love. Make sure Lib takes you somewhere fun EVERY day. Message any time. I’ll call back asap. I love you.”

Now, at least, I could look up and around me. The stewards were already doing the safety demonstration and the plane was being tugged back. I glanced across at Jame, who was staring out of the window. I wondered if e’d ever been on a plane before. I wanted to ask, but I didn’t want to disturb ir, and my throat felt like a load of concrete had dried in it. As soon as we were flying, they’d bring around drinks – just Standard-based in economy, but that would be fine; I’d mix in a whiskey to kill most of the bugs. Meanwhile, I tried to clear the itch with a series of soft panting coughs, then breathed heavily in my throat, hoping my inhalations might condense a little moisture in there.

As we ascended, I got my throat under control and settled into a type of calm. Jame stared out of the window until we levelled off in the centre of a cloud bank, and as e started fiddling with the entertainment screen in front of ir, the steward started eir announcement:

“We have now exited Swiss airspace and are authorised to serve beverages to our customers. We regret to inform you that our Standard beverage suppliers were late with their delivery and the stock could not be uploaded before departure. We regret any inconvenience, but we can offer you our full range of Premium-based beverages. Check the back of your in-flight magazine for the prices.’

Next to me, Jame was staring at the flight map on the screen. I tapped it on the leg and e turned to me.

“I’m sorry,” I said, “but I’m going to have to ask you for a sip of that water after all.”

“Sure,” e said, and went under the seat in front to get eir backpack, but when e rifled through the bag, e couldn’t find eir smartbottle. “Shit. I must have left it behind. What can I-”

“It’s all right. I’ll be able to wait ‘til we land.” But I wasn’t sure if I would. I was feeling too dizzy and my tongue felt too large for my mouth.

“It’s not all right,” e said. “I’m sorry.”

But there was nothing either of us could do. I watched as the steward poured sparkling drinks in little plastic cups for every passenger ahead of us, swiping their Premium tags as e went. “Anything to drink, M.?” the steward asked, parking the trolley in our row.

I shook my head and a brief look of pity, or perhaps disgust, crossed the steward’s face before e asked. “You’re certain? Nothing for your child?”

“No.”

E shrugged microscopically, the fake smile still pasted over eir painted features, and turned to the passenger across the aisle.

I thought about how we used to go to Lake Geneva on summer weekends, when the Jet d’Eau still ran, forcing its one-megawatt spray a hundred and forty metres into the air. The wind would always be blowing off the Lake’s surface and we’d run through the mist-drift in the sun along the promenade, freezing and burning at the same time, shrieking to be free. If I just imagined it, the spray would salve my throat for a few more hours.

When I looked at ir a few minutes later, Jame was still doggedly staring at the flight map on the screen.

“What are you doing?” I asked.

“Nothing.” But eir leg was jiggling manically.

“Is anything wrong?”

“No.”

But now e unclipped eir seatbelt, stood up and leaned over the seat behind ir. “You mind?” e asked the passenger behind us. “Can I...?” Now holding an empty plastic cup, e settled back down into eir seat and folded open the tray table.

E pointed at the map on the screen. The cartoon aeroplane was halfway across the Mediterranean. “We’re out of Europe now.”

We’re on a European airline, spending Swiss money, carrying European identity chips, I wanted to say. I knew that there were Security marshals dotted throughout every flight; I knew who the stewards reported to.

We are never out of Europe, I wanted to say.

But I said nothing, transfixed as e put eir hands into the pockets of eir jeans. E drew out two grey blobs, one darker, one lighter. Stones maybe, or something like hard putty because they seemed to give a little as e rubbed them between eir thumbs and fingertips. When e put the knobs back in eir pockets, I could smell a faint odour of metallic singe, like the trailings of a welding rod far away. Now e closed eir eyes, turned eir hands, slightly curled, palms up like a benediction, over the empty plastic cup. E smiled, an inward smile of the purest satisfaction, and pressed eir fingertips together.

I was there; I saw it. It mystified me as much as the video, because water materialised out of the air in front of eir fingers and filled the cup. Then, like turning off a tap, e disconnected eir fingers and the water stopped.

E passed me the cup, a voluntary act of mercy.

The first gulp washed through me like a flood over parched earth; I barely noticed it apart from a slight swelling inside. I swirled the second in my mouth. It tasted of peat, of earth, of air, of blood red; it filled me. The third sip – a blue fish of love and a green fish of hope.