

# A Walk in the Desert

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Published on Stories Space on 22 Feb 2019

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What could be more banal than going for a walk?

Tuvi Ornat goes for a walk in a suburb, gets lost in a desert, and is found in a cave by God, not that it does him any good ...

<https://www.storiesspace.com/stories/drama/-a-walk-in-the-desert-.aspx>

"A Walk in the Desert"

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October 8, 2014

Tuvi Ornat put the old concert ticket he'd been using as a bookmark between the two pages he had been reading and laid the dog-eared paperback gently on the table beside his chair. He stood up and stretched his arms.

"I'm going for a walk," Tuvi called upstairs but there was no response.

He scribbled a short note and slid a small corner of it beneath her tea mug on the kitchen table where she'd be sure to see it when she returned. He buckled a fanny pack around his waist and placed his keys and wallet in the zippered pockets. He put a notebook, pen, and the book he was reading in an old backpack one of his sons had left at home. Tuvi locked the door and walked outside.

It was a pleasant enough day, not too warm and not too cool. The few clouds in the pale blue sky were wispy like feathers. Tuvi walked past the manicured parkways and gardens. Palm tree fronds wavered slightly in the light breeze. He reached the main road and walked over to the shaded bus stop.

Tuvi pulled his book out of his backpack while he waited for the bus. He only managed to read a paragraph before the bus arrived and opened its accordion doors. He climbed the three steps, paid the driver, saw a seat in the middle of the bus where nobody was sitting, and sat down looking around at the other passengers.

A pretty young mother was sitting with her little boy who wore rather thick glasses. She looked like she might be religious because of the sleeves, but you couldn't be certain with women. Tuvi smiled at the little boy, reached across, and handed him a wrapped candy.

"What do you say?" the young mother asked her son prettily.

The little boy asked, "Can I have another one?"

Tuvi retrieved another candy from his pocket and handed it over to the little boy's extended hand. The mother looked embarrassed and then out the window. Tuvi also looked out his window and watched the stores and pedestrians flow by.

The bus arrived at the central station and Tuvi followed the mother and little boy out the rear doors of the bus. He stopped to look for his destination on the large sign, where he saw the platform number. Then, he walked towards his bus.

There was a group of young soldiers milling around the open baggage doors of the bus. They had their rifles slung over their shoulders this way and that. They looked so nice, the boys and girls, but they looked so young. Tuvi knew that meant he was getting older.

He was glad they were traveling with him on this bus, but it probably meant he'd have to stand most of the way until they reached the large army base just before he wanted to get off, unless one of them would be kind enough to give him his or her seat. The trouble was that Tuvi didn't look his age. People always thought he was much younger, although he didn't always feel younger inside.

Tuvi grabbed the overhead bar when the pneumatic doors closed with a wheeze, and the bus lurched backward as it pulled away from the platform. Soon the bus left town, turning onto the highway going south. The orchards and fields on either side of the speeding bus were a palette of mostly greens and browns. Tuvi wondered how the farmers would get by this year, the seventh year,

during which the land was to be left fallow and not to be worked.

The principle made sense to Tuvi, but the application of it in this country did not. He thought leaving a seventh of your farmland fallow and then rotating your crops made more sense than farming all your land six years and leaving it fallow in the seventh. Suppose there were a drought or too much rain in the sixth year?

The bus stopped at a crossroads near a small town. Two soldiers got off the bus and collected their duffle bags from under the bus. There was an empty seat next to a pretty soldier sleeping with her head against the window. Tuvi sat down gratefully. The bus picked up speed once more.

He looked out the window and noticed that the green fields had been replaced by dry brush and long stretches of sand. Tuvi took out his book and opened it across his knees. The soldier shifted her head against the seat back, an inch from his shoulder. A few strands of her thick blonde hair brushed his arm, or so he thought. Tuvi didn't want to look for fear of waking her. He relaxed back in his seat and closed his eyes.

Tuvi woke suddenly. The bus had stopped and the soldiers were milling toward the rear door of the bus.

"Hey Kira, we've arrived," someone said. "Stop molesting the old guy!"

The blonde-haired soldier sitting next to him sat up straight, turned in Tuvi's direction, and said, "Excuse me."

Tuvi stood up next to his seat so that she could exit with her friends. He watched them collect their duffle bags and start walking toward the gates of the large base. A veiled woman wearing a burka over jeans and sneakers, three children, and several bearded men wearing large knit skull caps entered the bus and sat down in the front seats. Tuvi eyed them suspiciously. He couldn't be certain whether they were one of us or one of them because he wasn't born here. The bus started to move.

The rocky, sandy landscape undulated as it flashed past the window like images in an old fashioned zoetrope. Dilapidated pickup trucks and young dark-skinned boys sitting on carts flicking switches on the backsides of lazy mules exited Tuvi's field of vision as quickly as they entered it.

A patchwork of tents and corrugated siding dotted the hills in the middle distance, away from the road. He noticed television antennae poking out of the center of most tents. The bus slowed down and stopped at a traffic light. A young boy was selling hot pretzels at the intersection while a couple of elders played shesh-besh in the shade of the bus stop. The light changed and the bus started up.

Soon the bus began its slow deliberate descent down a series of narrow, hairpin curves with sheer, mountainous walls on one side of the bus and the ground dropping away steeply on the other side. The veiled woman held her children tight against her while the bearded men murmured conspiratorially in a tongue Tuvi did not recognize.

Finally, the bus came out onto a wide straight stretch of road toward the great salt sea that could be seen in the distance. The bus slowed and stopped at the side of the road at an unremarkable spot, except for a rusted pole and sign indicating the way to the Qumran caves.

Tuvi stood up and walked unsteadily down the steps of the bus into the furnace of desert air. He walked toward a stand of trees wavering in and out of the heated air like a mirage. When he reached the shade of trees, he stopped to stretch his legs and turned back toward the road.

The bus had already disappeared from sight and the road was also wavering in and out of vision like something not quite substantial. He noticed that one of the bearded men had gotten off the bus with him and had paused halfway between the road and where Tuvi stood to light a cigarette between cupped hands.

Tuvi turned away from the road and followed the path beyond the stand, down the hill, and around the bend with his eyes. There wasn't much difference between the path and not the path. He'd come this far and he'd go a bit further.

Tuvi wished he'd taken along a few bottles of mineral water. Maybe there'd be some further on. He started walking down the path on the other side of the stand of trees, down the hill, and around the bend. He noticed the rocky hillsides had changed their hues to white and ochre from the abundance of lime and sulfur in this area.

Tuvi also noticed that the bearded man had also started down the same path, about fifty yards behind him. Tuvi continued walking.

The path led through a narrow gap between two tall cliffs.

Yea though I walk through the valley of the shadow , he thought to himself. Good place for an ambush .

The path climbed up some flat stones that formed a natural stairway. Tuvi followed the path to the top of a low promontory and looked back the way he had come. The bearded man was sitting on a grey-white boulder about the same distance from Tuvi as before, smoking, flicking ashes on the

ground, and looking off into the distance. He stubbed his cigarette into the path and continued towards Tuvi. Tuvi started walking up the hill.

Footpaths crisscrossed each other every so often. Beside most path crossings, Tuvi encountered a pile of stones, sometimes placed one on top of the other and sometimes put in a sort of pyramid, but there were other patterns as well. He had heard that the Bedouins construct and use stone markers to help them find their way across the mountains and valleys of the desert, say, to a village or well.

Tuvi thought it was interesting how the Bedouin used the rocks as a language that allowed them to understand what the desert was telling them. Everyone knew they were expert scouts and trackers in the desert because they knew the place of every rock and when a rock was out of place. The rock piles were no use to Tuvi, however, and so he continued up the path he chose to follow as best he could.

Tuvi climbed the hill. When he reached the top, he turned around to look for the bearded man, but he was nowhere to be found. Tuvi turned back around and looked at the wide expanse of valley at the bottom of the hill. Off a ways, craggy mountains grew on either side of the valley. The mountainsides were spotted with caves. He selected one of the caves that seemed accessible without a rope and climbing gear, and walked down the sandy hill toward it.

When he reached the ledge in front of the cave, Tuvi ducked his head and looked into the inviting shadow. He walked in a few paces, hunched over to avoid bumping his head against the rocky ceiling. He didn't see any bats or scorpions around so he sat down on one of the flat rocks jutting from the wall. He looked out from the cave toward the low western mountain tops. The sun was just about to touch the top crags.

Suddenly Tuvi felt very tired. He bent down to smooth away some of the rocks and twigs on the ground in front of him, lay his backpack down like a pillow, and stretched himself out carefully on the ground. Just a little snooze never hurt anyone, was the last thing he thought about before drifting off to sleep.

"You really should have brought along a few bottles of water," a voice interrupted Tuvi's sleep.

Tuvi woke up with a start. It was pitch dark all around him. He felt around with his hand for the flat rock he'd been sitting on before he'd decided to take a snooze. With his hand still on the flat rock, he sat up painfully, his back stiff with aching. He stood up carefully, remembering the low cave ceiling, swiveled around, and managed to sit down.

"What did you say?" he asked.

"You really should have brought along a few bottles of water."

"Tell me about it," Tuvi responded sarcastically.

"I just did."

"Where are you?" Tuvi demanded. "I can't see in this dark."

"I'm everywhere."

"Are you threatening me?" Tuvi asked testily.

"No, not really, though I could have struck you dead, killed you, whatever, at several points along the way, if I'd wanted to. The bus could've blown a tire going around one of those hairpin curves or that bearded gentleman could have come up behind you and slit your throat. Maybe he still will."

"Who are you?" Tuvi asked, not knowing where to face.

"Who do you think?"

"I think you're a nut who thinks he's God," Tuvi shot back, "or a crook running a scam. That's what I think."

"Are you an atheist?"

"You should know."

"Yeh, I thought so."

"Not really," Tuvi softened his voice. "I'm more of an agnostic. I don't have any evidence one way or the other."

"I know what an agnostic is."

"Sorry," Tuvi said. "I didn't mean to insult you."

"You're very polite. Does that mean you're afraid of me?"

"No," Tuvi responded. "That's just the way I was raised to be."

"Ah, so there's not much of a chance that you'll be worshipping me anytime soon?"

"Sorry, no."

"Why?"

"Because there's not much about you that's worthy of worship," Tuvi said. Then he asked, "When's the last time you were in a synagogue, church, or mosque?"

"Never been in one."

"So you have no idea what people are saying in your name?"

"Not really. No. What are they saying about me?"

Tuvi collected his thoughts before answering.

"They say that you're a jealous god, that you demand our obedience, that you're always testing our faith in you, that we were born in sin, that we should kill those who don't believe in you, that you made us masters of all that you created, that we shouldn't eat pork, that we shouldn't mix meat with milk, that we shouldn't wear jeans..."

"I said all those things? Sounds pretty self-serving to me."

"That's what I've been thinking," Tuvi said. "Why would a god of the whole universe micromanage like that, especially in such a juvenile manner?"

"Now that we have that settled, you seem like you have a pretty good head on your shoulders. What are we going to do about getting you rescued?"

"How about you?" Tuvi asked.

"Don't look at me. I can't create a boulder so heavy that even I can't lift it, and, just between you and me, I can't even lift a tiny pebble off the ground. Whisking you back to the bus stop and making the bus come to collect you is a bit beyond my abilities."

"Maybe some soldiers will come to rescue me," Tuvi offered half-heartedly.

"Did you let anyone know where you're going or when you should be back?"

Tuvi told him about the note he'd left for his wife on the kitchen table.

"What did it say?"

"That I was going for a walk."

"That's it?"

"Pretty much so."

"Nothing about where or when you'd be back?"

"No," Tuvi said softly. "It doesn't matter."

"Why's that?"

Tuvi said, "She's been gone a year now."

"I see."

Tuvi stretched, didn't say anything for a while. It was starting to get chilly in his cave. He yawned. He was starting to get a bit of a headache, too. It was kind of a shame. He hadn't intended for things to end this way.

Then he wondered what way that would be.

Tuvi stirred from his sleep again. He heard them before he saw them, the whistles and ululations. Then he saw what looked at first like fireflies in the distance. The whistling and shouts were getting stronger, louder. The fireflies turned into torches lighting up faces and arms.

"Oh," he said to himself, "so that was how it was going to be."

Suddenly two men stood at the entrance to the cave. They were holding torches. It was hard to tell from the flickering light, the way it danced on their faces, but it seemed to Tuvi that one of them was the bearded man he'd seen following him from the bus. The one who looked like the bearded man shouted something indecipherable to someone else on his right.

The cave filled with the light of the torches as two men entered, hunched over and carrying a blanket along with plastic bottles of mineral water.