

**HUMAN WISHES / ENEMY COMBATANT**





**HUMAN  
WISHES / ENEMY  
COMBATANT**

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IOTA**

Published by  
**grandIOTA**

2 Shoreline, St Margaret's Rd, St Leonards TN37 6FB  
&  
37 Downsway, North Woodingdean, Brighton BN2 6BD

[www.grandiota.co.uk](http://www.grandiota.co.uk)

Second edition 2022

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First published by Say It With Stones (2012)

Cover photo courtesy of Lynn Bennett  
Typesetting & book design by Reality Street  
Thanks to David Rose for facilitating this

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-1-874400-85-1

*for Catherine*

*All are free to leave,  
apart from those who will be detained.*

– Orders from the general command  
of the Israeli Defense Forces regarding  
the townspeople of Lydda, Palestine.

July 12, 1948.

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## Apple Seized

**T**hey had just returned to the United States. He thought that the immigration official at the border-control booth had looked at him skeptically when running his passport, even though he was a citizen. Maybe he looked like a terrorist. Fortunately the line had been long and he was passed through with his wife. It helped that she looked more securely like an American, he thought. She had blond hair and an open face. Everything seemed to go easier when she was at his side. They went down the escalator to the baggage claim area. They had their item each of carry-on luggage but had checked their larger bags. Once in the baggage claim area, his wife said that she was tired and went to take a seat on a row of chairs against the nearest wall of the vast room. He hadn't slept well on this trip and should have been more tired than his wife, but he was filled with elation at the thought of being home, where he knew he would be able to sleep again and his bowels would return to normal. But at the far end of the baggage claim area he saw the customs gates and realized that home was still on the other side. They remained in one of those In-Between places that exist only in airports, he thought. It was a place where the use of cell phones and cameras was not permitted, a voice from a loudspeaker said. A screen hanging over one of the carousels was already lit up with the number of their flight, and passengers he recognized from the plane were taking up places around the sides of the carousel. The passengers were grouped the thickest where the conveyor belt emerged from the hump in the middle of the carousel

and grew thinner and thinner around the sides of the carousel in a counter-clockwise direction up to the final stretch, which had no passengers at all until one returned to the original group. The conveyor belt in the middle and the sloped, interlocking metal plates on the sides were not moving but everyone seemed to know the counter-clockwise direction the luggage would travel, maybe from observing the passengers from other flights around their respective carousels, he reasoned. He inserted himself about halfway between the hole in the hump where the conveyor belt emerged and the nearest curve of the carousel itself, just a few yards after that end turned into the long straightaway before the opposite curve down at the far end. The only shortcoming was that the conveyor belt would convey the baggage over the opposite edge of the hump. He would be able to see their luggage items emerge on the belt from the hole in the middle but then they would disappear until the metal plates carried them around the curve. It wasn't a bad position but not a very good one either, he decided, but he immediately grew protective of it. There were still other passengers looking for places around the carousel, and many of these, instead of going down to the sparsely-populated end where they would have to wait longer for their luggage, loitered behind the front rank of passengers down at his end, poised to plunge in if they saw their bags and temporarily displace those in the front rank. But what if they misidentified a bag as their own – he'd seen this happen often enough – and after releasing it back onto the carousel they remained in the front rank, out of which they had displaced someone such as himself who had been there first? It might even be possible for someone to *pretend* to misidentify a bag in order to plunge into the front rank. He set his item of carry-on luggage down beside him, leaning it against his calf so that he could be reassured of its presence without having to

take his eyes from the carousel. He propped the other foot up on the edge of carousel, then saw that nobody else was doing this and took his foot down. It seemed to be taking a long time for the bags to emerge. He squatted to take some stress off his legs, then stood up again. Nobody else had been squatting at that moment. Finally he noticed a woman further along the straightaway sit down on the carousel rim. Her back was to the central hump and her buttocks drooped over the rim. The woman was in the exact position that she would be in if she were going to take a dump on the carousel, he thought. He wondered if anybody else had the same thought. He felt briefly embarrassed at having had the thought himself, and imagined protesting, with a gesture at the woman's seated figure, that it had been inescapable. He turned away and looked for the attractive passenger he'd seen on the plane, hoping maybe to catch her eye. He knew he looked rumpled and unshaven, but he thought he might also look exotic and attractive in a world-weary way, at least for a man of his age. He had gotten some sun on the trip. Of course she would have to be into men of his age. But probably he looked like a Middle Eastern terrorist instead of a Mediterranean lover. It didn't matter because he couldn't locate the attractive passenger among those at the carousel. Perhaps, like his wife, she was resting somewhere while a male partner fetched the bags, although it had been his impression that she was traveling solo. He could see his wife, however, if he raised himself onto his toes. There she was with her Mac open on her lap. She had to be back at work early the next morning. He saw his wife set her laptop onto the vacant seat to her right and begin to take her sweater off. It had been cold on the plane when she'd put the sweater on. They had been in their seats – unfortunately the middle seats of the center aisle – so he'd had to help tug the sweater down her back, he remembered. Now his wife

was on a different set of seats, against one wall of the baggage claim area instead of in the center aisle of the plane, and she wanted to take the sweater off. The seat on the other side of his wife was occupied by an older woman who leaned away so that she wouldn't be struck by flailing elbows as his wife struggled with the sweater over her head. As the sweater came up, the blouse beneath clung to it and his wife's midriff and even the cups of her brassiere were bared. He thought that the older woman in the next seat had an expression of disapproval on her face, although at this distance he couldn't tell for sure. Maybe she would have a better opinion of his wife when the blond hair and open face re-emerged. A high-pitched noise came from somewhere and went on for a long time. It was loud enough that a few people put their hands over their ears. He thought at first that it was the siren to announce the activation of their carousel, but the light which was supposed to accompany that siren did not light up and the conveyor belt did not move. Finally the high-pitched noise stopped. He thought of a joke he would have liked to make aloud: *They always unload the high-pitched noises first*. He wished his wife were at his side so that he could make the joke. She might have appreciated it, although more likely it would not have registered. The joke would not have registered because the high-pitched noise which had been the joke's occasion would not have registered, he understood. His wife had been concentrating for the last few days on updating the PowerPoint slides for her lectures, and even if the laptop had been closed and stowed away in her item of carry-on luggage the file would still have been open in her mind. Her powers of concentration were such that she could repel with an unconscious facial twitch a noise loud enough to make other people put their hands over their ears. But her presence would at least have provided a pretext for saying his

joke aloud, so that other passengers nearby might overhear it and laugh. The man on his left or the couple on his right, for instance, he considered, might laugh. In his mind he tried out several variations of the wording of the joke, to get it just right. He glanced sidelong at the woman member of the couple on his right and wondered if to her he might look more foreign than American. If he opened his mouth for the joke he would clearly identify himself as American, but it was too late now for the joke to sound spontaneous. It had to sound spontaneous to be an example of actual wit. He ran his fingers over the stubble on his upper lip and around his chin. He found it more stimulating to stroke the stubble against the grain. Having stubble made him feel unwashed, or – since he always felt unwashed after a flight – extra-unwashed, and like people looked at him with suspicion. He was certain the passport-control agent had looked at him with suspicion. He was almost certain. There was a different noise, still loud but more like a honk than a whine, and the light over their carousel began to revolve. There was a shudder and a jolt from somewhere underneath the central hump and the conveyor belt began moving, and the large interlocking metal plates which made up the surface of the carousel itself began moving. He was looking at the large interlocking metal plates and noticing the shearing sound they made as they moved together and apart but he had the ambient sense of a general reorganization of attitudes and postures among the group surrounding the carousel, of which he was a part. Down the hump to his right he could see the first bags emerge on the conveyor belt. He lost sight of the bags when they tumbled down on the other side of the hump, but the bags re-emerged eventually around the curve to his left and made their way on the large metal plates in his direction. It was just as he had visualized to himself some moments ago. He had the illusion that the carousel

speeded up the closer the luggage got to him, going fastest right as the bags passed within reach. He remembered this illusion from past experiences at baggage-claim carousels, and he experienced it again on this occasion as his wife's bag approached. He had missed the bag coming out of the hump onto the conveyor belt but spotted it as soon as it appeared around the bend of the carousel, between several other luggage items. His wife's bag had a distinctive appearance, somewhat like a large athletic sneaker, he thought. He counted that it was the fourth bag out. As his wife's distinctive item of luggage approached it seemed to speed up, and he became acutely conscious not only of the accelerating luggage item but of his own physical separateness. Both feelings intensified with each second it took for the bag to get to him. Then there was a brief frenzy of motion and the task was achieved. He had grabbed the side-handle of the bag and lifted it out and set it behind him on the other side of the carousel rim. He was pleased that he had done it one-handed and without audible grunts. He looked around and spotted the attractive passenger he had been unable to locate earlier. She was the same woman who had been sitting on the edge of the carousel in the position of a person about to take a dump, he realized. He returned his attention to his wife's distinctive luggage item, pressing a button on a different handle and extending it to its full length until he felt it click. He could reach behind him to touch the handle and assure himself that his wife's bag was still there even as he continued to scout the carousel for his own item of checked luggage. His carry-on bag was no longer leaning against his calf, however. It must have been displaced in the brief frenzy of motion, he reasoned. But it was easy enough to confirm the bag's presence with a sideways motion of his toe. The successful and grunt-free extraction of his wife's luggage item from the carousel had left him feeling more



secure about his mastery of the immediate terrain. Moreover nobody had tried to plunge into the front rank and displace him. He scouted for his luggage item among the bags that passed before him on the interlocking metal plates and from time to time craned for a better glimpse of the bags emerging on the conveyor belt from the hole in the hump. There was a high likelihood that his luggage item was imminent, because it had probably accompanied his wife's item into the plane, and his wife's item had already come out, he reasoned. The flat surface of the hump in the middle of the carousel was orange and one of the few things in the vast baggage claim area that had any color to it. Or one of the few things fixed permanently, he revised, unlike the passengers with their luggage items, who came and went and were occasionally colorful. Still his luggage item did not appear. No, he thought, reconsidering his earlier thought, if his wife's bag had been almost the first item out, his would surely be the last. For a while no new luggage emerged on the conveyor belt, and he wondered if anyone had misappropriated his item. It was black and rectangular; he could distinguish it from similar bags only by certain details of make and wear which to him were intimately recognizable but, he knew, subtle. But most of the passengers remained poised around the rim of the carousel, inspecting the same offerings of luggage and casting the same unrequited glances at the hole in the central hump. His bag no longer seemed imminent. He turned to look at a group of flight attendants passing between his carousel and the one behind him. He turned from the waist, keeping his feet planted so that his toes still faced the carousel, to maintain his spot. Each attendant pulled a compact bag on rollers behind her. They made up a larger contingent than would be needed for a single flight, he thought. Maybe they weren't flight attendants at all but a cadet corps of female pilots. They wore

identical uniforms of white blouses and black skirts and jackets, with small black caps. They all had blond or lightish brown hair and spoke in high voices in a language he couldn't understand, and all of them were more or less pretty – probably prettier for being all together like that, he thought. He imagined them as a flock of birds swooping past. He turned back and was trying to think what kind of bird when he saw a woman in a different kind of uniform moving among the passengers on the other side of the carousel with a dog on a leash. The dog was sniffing at the luggage and sometimes it looked like the woman was leading the dog and sometimes it looked like the dog was leading the woman. Everyone was looking at the dog now. It looked like a beagle instead of a large dog like a German shepherd, which was the kind of dog he associated with police activities involving dogs. And yet he assumed that the dog was sniffing for signs of drugs or bombs. And yet everyone looked at the dog light-heartedly, because it was a small- or medium-sized dog like a beagle and because it was a woman on the other end of the leash. The woman was small- or medium-sized as well, light-boned and with light-brown hair cut in a bob, or something to his eyes a little longer than a bob but not yet shoulder-length. Her uniform was blue pants and white shirt. She and the dog moved in and out of the crowd and she spoke to the dog in low encouraging sounds. The dog's nose went right and left and the dog's tail went left and right. One or two sniffs was all the dog needed. Several children looked like they wanted to pet the dog; he wondered if the woman in the uniform had to warn them off, like a blind person if someone accosted their seeing-eye dog. He could see her lips move. *Working dog! Working dog!* she might be saying. Even small amounts of non-work interaction could weaken the training of a working dog, he thought. More luggage items were

finally emerging on the conveyor belt and the passengers turned their attention to the new selection while the woman in the uniform and the dog moved off to the other carousels. Among the new items he still did not see his own. He reasoned that a transatlantic flight had many passengers, and therefore many items. He calculated that since only a third or so of the people had gotten their items it was too early to begin worrying. He propped a foot up on the edge of carousel, then saw that nobody else was doing this and took his foot down. He wondered who the items belonged to that just kept going around and around. He squatted to take some stress off his legs, then stood up again. Nobody else had been squatting at that moment. If he raised himself onto his toes he could still see his wife. There she was with her open face bent over her open laptop. It was not too early to feel irritated with her. He had her item of checked luggage already but still there was no sign of his item. They remained in one of those In-Between places that exist only in airports, he thought. But no, there were other, similar kinds of In-Between places, he revised. There were hotels, and especially airport hotels. There were highway rest stops. There were the spaces of shopping malls, including the food courts, and the more confined spaces of supermax prisons. He ran his fingers over the stubble on his upper lip and around his chin. He stroked the stubble against the grain and felt stimulated and unwashed and under suspicion. The carousels were like the rotors of a giant electric shaver, he thought. All he had to do was fall to his knees and place his breast on the rim of the carousel and lower his chin towards the large interlocking metal plates which made a shearing sound as they moved together and apart. He had an ambient sense of the people around him turning to look the other way and he turned to look, too. The woman in the blue and white uniform and the beagle-like dog were

back, this time on his side of the carousel. The dog sniffed bags and shoes, nose going right and left, tail going left and right. One or two sniffs was all the dog needed. The leash went taut and slack, and taut and slack, as first the dog led, and then the woman. Everyone watched in a light-hearted way, although less light-hearted now that they were so close. The dog sniffed his wife's luggage item that resembled an athletic sneaker – one sniff, two sniffs. The dog sniffed his carry-on item that was by his feet – one sniff, two sniffs. Three sniffs, four sniffs. The woman with the leash said, What have you got there? He didn't know if the woman was addressing him or the dog. He said, Just magazines, a book. The woman gave a tug on the leash to see if the dog would be led away or come back. The dog came back. Five, six sniffs. He was looking at the dog sniffing his bag but he had the ambient sense of a general reorganization of attitudes and postures of the group around him, of which he was no longer a part. The woman said, Do you have anything in there that you did not declare on your customs form? Do you have any food or other items you purchased outside of the country? He shook his head and said no. Then he said, I don't think so. He was acutely conscious not only of the dog and his bag but of himself, and he became more acutely conscious the more the dog sniffed. He bowed and unzipped the front pocket of his bag to show inside. The dog and the woman were not interested in the magazines and the book. He unsealed the velcro strip of another pouch where there was a plastic water bottle, a poorly folded map, a rusted tin pastille case with a rubber-band around it, and an apple. The dog and the woman were interested in the apple. The dog sniffed and looked back and forth at the woman and twisted its rump and the woman said, There it is, that's it. The apple was yellowish-green with orange flecks and not very large. He handed out the

apple to the woman. He rose and heard murmurs and possible laughter from the passengers around him at whom he did not look. The woman patted the dog and praised the dog in a sing-song that was higher pitched than the voice in which she had asked him about the items in his bag. The woman rose and said, Do you have the blue and white customs form you filled out on the plane? He fished the blue and white customs form he had filled out on the plane out of the front zipper pocket of his bag and handed it to the woman. She had the leash on her wrist and she lifted her knee to prop the form while she made a few quick strokes with a red felt-tipped marker. She had made the fruit item vanish. It was very difficult to concentrate on anything in particular. There was still a chance he might be taken to a separate room and asked questions, he thought. He wondered, Who would claim his bag? Who would alert his wife? Without looking he had a sense of everyone watching. The woman in the uniform gave him back the form and pointed to the far end of the room. She said, You have to show that to the man at the gate. He looked at what she had written on the form, a combination of red letters and numerals and then the red words: Apple Seized.