

Noah's Boat 000

By

Wolfgang Wright

WHY I LIKE IT: *Fiction Editor JOEY CRUSE writes... Wolfgang Wright, apart from having a pretty great name, has crafted "Noah's Boat" with such humor that it would be hard for anyone to not enjoy.*

Tom is a man of the land, a dairy farmer, and a neighbor to the infamous Noah of Noah's Ark – the one who talked to God and managed to save the last vestiges of humanity from the great floods of Mr. Nice Guy upstairs – who is having a bit of an existential crises in the face of 12 days of rain, a disbelieving wife, classically blundering beet farmers, and the need to figure out just how true the claims might be (a crisis of faith(eh?) if I dare say wryly).

Clearly, I don't have much care for the biblical tale – I much prefer Wright's. There is an earthiness and cleverness available here that takes an old tale and turns what we've always been told upside down and does it with an aplomb that literally made me laugh out loud while reading – a feat, while probably more reflective of a malaise on my part, that rarely happens and, when it does, I will take my time to relish in it.

The characters are perfectly farcical, the tale layered with irony, the control and craft of the writer is subtle, and the story, thankfully, doesn't have any of the satire needed to deconstructed the old to form the new. There is also a running gag about camel toe that just makes me happy.

I would gladly tell anyone to read this story. Religious or not, literary or not, a reader or not, I think that Wright's, "Noah's Boat" is fun, well-written, and a welcome addition to this issue. Take the time to enjoy this work.

I did.

Five Stars.

QUALITY QUOTABLE *(for the love of language...)*

"Well, you know what they say," Marty was quick to chime in. "You win some, you lose some."
To which Aleck Winsome rolled his eyes. "Joke never gets old for you, does it?"

"Nope," Marty said, shaking his head with pleasure, "sure don't."

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Jack snorted, and Marty and Aleck followed suit. Then Marty patted Tom on the back.

"What do you say, Tom? We were thinking about heading on down to the whorehouse and getting ourselves some camel toe, if you catch my drift."

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Noah's Boat

It had been raining for twelve days straight when Tom Butters the dairy farmer turned to his wife at dinner and said, "Say, Marge, you think there's somethin' in it, what Noah was saying the other night?"

A stout, bosomy woman, Marge looked up from her cheese casserole like a goat had just wandered in from the barn and kicked her in the backside. "Noah Kowalski?" she asked. "When did you run into him?"

Tom knew she wasn't used to him speaking over dinner. Usually when he came home after a long day of squeezing teats he'd slap on a feed bag and eat until he burped, then he'd retire to the living room and watch their three daughters put on a play with nary a word passing through his lips. Usually, he didn't start speaking until he knew Marge a couple of times in the bedroom—although after that, it was hard to shut him up. And perhaps that's how he should have handled it this time as well—he should have waited until the two of them were alone, so as

not to bicker in front of the girls. But sometimes, when you've got an itch, it's hard not to scratch it.

"Nah," he said, "Noah Weinstein," and he flitted a look across the table at Abigail, their youngest, whom he'd caught more than once stealing words with Japheth, one of Noah's boys. "You think what he said the other night, at the community center, about the rain and all, that there was somethin' in it? You know, about how it's gonna rain for forty days and forty nights, till the whole world's covered in water and we're all drownin' in it, except for him and whoever he's taking with him on that giant boat he's building."

His wife wrinkled her nose. She'd never cared much for Noah, and she wasn't afraid to show it—or, for that matter, put it into words. "Please, Noah Weinstein ain't never made a morsel of sense in his whole life. Never learned how to do nothing neither, least not in no competent way. Don't tell me you've forgotten last summer already."

"No, Marge."

"When you had him helping you put up that new fence?"

"I remember, Marge."

"And do you remember what you called him?"

"Yes, Marge."

"Jack of no trades you called him. More than once you said it." Shaking her head, Marge threw her own look toward Abigail, who by now was showing her butterscotch pudding a lot of undue concern. "Not to mention his work ethic. Up by noon, tired by four. And what did he do the rest of the day? Remember? He sat around and read those scriptures of his, and preached from them, too, telling us all the ways we're supposed to be good, like he of all people knows

what's good—*him*. And where'd he hear about all this rain he's predictin'? Do you remember that?"

"Yes, Marge, I remember."

"From God, he said. He said he heard it from God." Marge shook her head again.

"Honestly."

"But you have to admit, it has been raining a lot lately. More than usual, I'd say. Fact, I can't remember a time when it's rained for more than what—six, maybe seven days straight?" and he gazed out the window at the darkness and wet. "And from the looks of it, it's not gonna stop."

"So what are you sayin', Tom? Are you sayin' we oughta change our ways 'cause Noah Weinstein says so?" His wife laughed, then reached for the sour cream. "I'll tell you what. Why don't tomorrow instead of milking your cows, you grab your hammer and go on over to his place and help him finish up his boat? Why not instead of doing what you're supposed to to provide for this family, why don't you go and do that instead?"

Tom frowned. What with him not used to speaking like this, and everything he was saying falling on deaf ears, he felt like a new calf in a crowded barn. "Well," he said after a time, "if your gonna get all upset about it, maybe I will!"

"Eat your supper."

* * *

Of course, Marge was right. Of all the people whom God might have chosen to speak to on this earth, Noah Weinstein seemed like an unusual choice. After all, this was the same man who just

last winter had tried to run a string in and out of every home in the region, claiming he was going to revolutionize the way people talked to each other, when in reality all he wound up doing was tangling everything up so badly that they had to get Simon Buck the sheep shearer to come down and cut it all loose. And now this. Now he was building a boat, a boat so big he damn near went and chopped down a whole forest for the wood to build it with. And to make matters worse, he had his boys running all over creation trying to scrounge up every kind of wild animal there was, two of each kind, so that after the flood waters receded the couples could procreate and keep their respective species alive. It was crazy no matter how you looked at it. So if Noah was really hearing voices, there was little chance they were coming from God; no, the safe money was on they were coming from his own demented head.

Still, the next morning Tom put on his galoshes and waded on down to the valley to see how things were coming along. He knew he wouldn't be the only one, because in this kind of weather there wasn't much else to do to pass the time except to poke fun of your neighbors, and sure enough, as soon as he got over the hill he spotted Jack Olafson, Marty Plowers, and Aleck Winsome, a trio of beet farmers whose fields had been plumb washed out.

"Tom!" they all shouted at him from the fence they were leaning on. "Tom, get your raw hide over here!"

"Jack. Marty. Aleck," Tom said, tipping his hat to them. He shook their hands one by one, then dropped his forearms onto the fence and did some leaning himself.

"What brings you down here, Tom?" Aleck asked after spitting some chaw into the pool of water around their feet.

"Same reason as you, I reckon," Tom replied, watching the chaw as it floated away, though soon enough he turned his attention to the boat, which had grown a few extra stories

since the last time he'd seen it, so that, from where he was standing, less than a hundred cubits away, it looked downright mountainous. "What's the latest? He about done with her?"

Jack—tall, handsome, and the cleverest of the three (though that was hardly singing his praises)—suddenly brayed like a mule with sprinkle up its nose. "He's working on puttin' in some cages," he said.

"Cages? Oh, for the animals."

The three beet farmers all looked at each other, and then at him.

"You knew about them?" Marty asked. He had a high voice, like a boy in the throes of puberty, though his beard was as long as the rest of them.

"Japheth wandered by the other day with a giraffe," Tom answered, maintaining his gaze on the boat. "I was worried he might be bringing it to Abigail as a gift, so I cut him off and told him she don't need no giraffe, and that's when he told me what it was for."

"Still, it's a bigger hoot hearing it straight from the horse's mouth," Jack said, and he cupped his meaty, weather-worn hands around his own pair of lips. "Hey, Noah!" he bellowed. "Noah, come on out here and tell Tom Butters what you're up to!"

Marty and Aleck chuckled, anticipating what was to come.

A moment later, the man they were wanting to see came out onto the main deck of the boat, sky high above the world, and peered over the edge.

"Noah," Jack bellowed again, "Noah, tell Tom about the cages your buildin', about what you're intending to use them for."

With nothing to be gained by it, Noah ignored the request, and seemed to look down at Tom and Tom alone. Because of the distance between them, to say nothing of the rain coming down, it was hard to tell for sure, but Tom got the impression that Noah was surprised to see him

there with the others, as if he'd thought better of him, assumed he'd be unwilling to roll around in the mud like an ordinary hog. And truth be told, Tom was a little embarrassed about it himself, and he lowered his head enough so that the brow of his hat hid his eyes from Noah's view. But he could still make out the hull of the boat.

"Aw, now he's gone," Aleck grumbled, and stomped the water beneath his foot.

"Well, you know what they say," Marty was quick to chime in. "You win some, you lose some."

To which Aleck Winsome rolled his eyes. "Joke never gets old for you, does it?"

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Marty ignored him, waiting for Tom's reply. "So, how about it? You in?"

"I reckon I'll pass," Tom answered, returning his attention to the boat. "I don't think Marge would like it none, me doing something like that. Not one bit."

"We ain't inviting Marge," Aleck clarified, as if it were needed.

"All the same," Tom said, "I better pass."

"Your loss," Marty said, and together, the three beet farmers went off to get themselves some camel toe.

* * *

Tom stayed put, and continued to gaze at the boat. He just couldn't believe it, how someone as inept as Noah, who just last year had struggled to square a few posts into the ground, could manage to pull off a project of such magnitude. Something had to be amiss, and he began to wonder if what appeared to be astonishing from a distance, and through a shield of pouring rain no less, might, upon closer inspection, turn out to be all sizzle and no steak. Perhaps Noah's boat was just like that cow a Philistine had tried to sell him a few years ago, which at first blush looked to be chock full of warm, sweet milk, but when he got down on his stool and gave the teats a good squeeze, turned out to be as dry as a garden snake. Some things—cows, clothing, and women, to name a few—you just couldn't judge by staring at them: you had to get your hands on them and give them a good once over in order to assess their real worth. Which was why, as the pool around his legs began to leak into his galoshes, he climbed over the fence and sloshed his way down to the boat, with each step sinking deeper and deeper into the water, till by the time he reached the hull he was darn near wading in it. Hanging over the side of the boat was a rope ladder, and with all his strength he yanked himself up to the main deck.

Once on solid footing—and it was rather solid, he noted—he searched for proofs of shoddy craftsmanship and poor design, the hallmarks of Noah's previous work, but at least out in the open everything looked up to snuff, and so he walked over to the nearest entrance and stepped inside. Just getting out of the rain was a relief, but he didn't allow that to cloud his judgment. Taking his time, he wandered round the bowels of the ship, peering closely at the seams between the planks and every now and then giving the framework a hardy tap with his knuckles, hoping to find some indications that the boat was nothing more than a floating coffin, and that if it ever did set sail, the wood would split apart like so much hay and sentence everyone crazy enough to have come aboard to death by drowning. Instead, he discovered that everything was as sturdy and well-built as a purebred Hereford, and was of a quality that would have made the best carpenters in the land proud to say they'd constructed it themselves. After a while he began to feel foolish, and wondered whether he ought not to leave before someone saw him, but as he was making his way back to the main deck, he heard hammering beneath him, and decided, seeing as he was already here, that he might as well say hello.

Noah and his three boys—Shem, Ham, and the youngest, Japheth—were all on the lowest deck, hard at work. Shem and Ham were on the far end building small, box-sized cages, the kind for keeping rodents and such, while Noah and Japheth were putting together what looked to be a pen for pigs. Because Noah was storing his herd on high ground till the boat was finished, none of the animals were in the room yet, except for a couple of emus milling about in the corner, but with a healthy bowl of seed to nibble on, they were blind to what was going on around them.

Japheth saw Tom first and blushed, perhaps concerned that his appearance might have something to do with Abigail. He set down his ruler and tucked in his shirt—fussed with his hair

a little, too, doing his best to look presentable. "Good morning, sir," he said, his voice a mixture of emotions.

Hearing this, the others stopped what they were doing and stared, and for a second Tom thought he'd made a mistake in coming down here. In the back of his mind he could hear Marge's voice barking at him for being such a fool, telling him to get out of there before he got himself all mixed up in Noah's affairs, but Tom just had to know the truth about what his neighbor was up to, if only so he could sleep soundly at night, confident he hadn't missed out on anything.

"Morning," he said, trying to keep things casual. "That's to say, if it is still morning. Can't hardly tell no more with all of them black clouds hangin' about in the sky."

"It's mighty bleak out there," Noah agreed, brushing sawdust off his robe. He came over and shook Tom's hand, firm and gentle. The disapproving glare from earlier was gone now, and in its place was sheer delight, as if he'd been waiting for this moment all along, for Tom to come and see him personally, instead of hanging around outside with a bunch of hecklers. "Say, boys," he called over his shoulder, "why don't you give us a minute, alright? It's time for a break anyway. Your mother should have a snack prepared for you by now."

"Sure, Pa," Ham said, waving his brothers along, and like the dutiful sons they were, he and Shem headed straight for the exit, while Japheth, a boy of his own will, remained behind.

"How's Abigail doing?" he asked with his head turned down and his posture all bent to the side like a bow. "Been a while since I seen her."

"She's doing fine," Tom answered, rather flatly, not wanting to encourage the poor boy, though in the interest of decency, decided to throw him a bone. "She talks about you once in a while."

At this, Japheth lifted his head, and his face was filled with joy. "She does?"

Tom nodded and nothing more. "Every once in a while."

"Better go on up now, son," Noah urged, directing him to the door. "Might be your last chance for lemon cupcakes before we sail."

"Yes, Pa," the boy replied, and off he went with a new spring in his step.

Once alone, Noah turned to Tom and said, "Gonna be mostly fish and eggs for a while."

Tom shrugged, not knowing what to make of the comment. Noah put out his hand, and the two of them walked over to where Ham and Shem had been working, and took a seat on their stools.

"So, Tom," Noah began cordially, "what can I do you for?"

Tom stiffened a bit at the question. Though he knew more or less what he wanted to ask, he hadn't the foggiest idea of how to go about it, and for several moments he fumbled to find the right words, till at last he decided to just come out with it, in whatever form it took.

"Well, see, it's about what you said the other day, you know, at the community center. About all this rain we been having, and how you're thinking there's more to come."

"I see," Noah replied, nodding along.

"It got me to thinking, see, and since then I haven't hardly been able to think about nothing else. So I thought, maybe if I came to you and got some answers, maybe that would help clear my head up a little."

"Go ahead, Tom. Ask me anything."

Tom hesitated again, but seeing as he'd come this far, there was no sense in turning chicken now. "I guess what I want to know is, is whether it's true, 'specially the part about you

speakin' to God. I guess I'm wonderin' if that was true, if you really spoke to Him, or if you were just pulling our legs for not believin' in you."

With a broad smile Noah leaned forward and patted Tom on the knee. "In truth, Tom, He did most the talking. But that's the thing about God. He'll keep silent for millennia at a time, but once He gets Himself going, He's like a, like a...well, He's like a flood," and to ease Tom's mind, he went over the whole shebang again, about how God had come to him with a plan to wipe out all the badness in the world and put in its place nothing but good, and how He'd told him to build a big boat—an ark, He'd called it—to house his family in and to take on a pair of all the animals in the land, and how in the end it was up to him to start the human race over again, making it the way God had intended it from the first—and all the while Tom did his best to follow along, trying to make sense of it, but by the time Noah had finished, he felt more confused than ever.

"I must confess," he said, wringing out his hat, "much as I'd like to, it's just a little too much for a simple dairy farmer to bite off and chew."

Noah nodded weightily, as if he, too, had had trouble believing it in the beginning. But he was past that now, full of faith now, and so he said to Tom, "I've a proposition for you, something you may want to consider."

"Go on," Tom said, figuring it wouldn't hurt to hear it. "I'm listening."

"There's a few families round I've asked to join us on the boat—good people, people you know. What I was thinking was, perhaps you and Marge and your three girls would like to join us on board as well. Rest assured, I'm not asking you to believe in what I told you—not yet anyway. The whole thing'll be like a trial run. You come on board, get yourself settled in, and

then, if after a day or two the rain stops, the clouds clear, and the sun comes out, you're welcome to get back off and no one will be the wiser."

Tom mulled this over a moment. "You're sayin' you'd keep it a secret?"

"We'll sneak you on at night and off the same way, if it comes to that." Noah leaned back, taking in the room. His beard was longer now than the way he normally wore it, and it seemed to add weight to what he was saying. "You've always been a good friend to me, Tom, always giving me milk and cheese when I couldn't afford to pay, and allowing me to work for you when I needed it, too, even though Lord knows I'm not much of a worker. Plus, we're gonna need some entertainment on this boat to keep our minds off of what's going on around us, and rumor has it, your girls put on quite a show." Noah leaned in and lowered his voice. "And speaking father to father, I'm sure my Japheth would feel a whole lot better knowing your Abigail was safe and sound with us."

Tom took in Noah's words and pondered them, doing his best to focus on the details at hand and not the reasons for their necessity, which still made little sense to him. To fill in some of the gaps he asked a few more questions, and once he was satisfied, or at least as satisfied as he was ever going to be, they got up and shook hands together.

"Well," Tom said, "I'll have to run it by Marge, but you sure given me somethin' to think about."

"I wouldn't think about it too long, Tom," Noah warned, and at that very second, just as the words had left his mouth, there was a loud clap of thunder overhead, as if the sky had split in two. Tom shivered, but Noah just chuckled, staring above. "He said you've got three days to make up your mind before it's too late."

"Who said?" Tom asked, looking up.

“God.”

“That was Him? Just now?”

Noah grinned. “I’m just jerking your chain. But in all seriousness, time’s a-wasting.”

* * *

“You spoke to him?” Marge asked, shooting up in bed. “Where? Where did you speak to him?”

“On his boat,” Tom answered, rubbing his feet, still trying to press the wet out of them. This time he’d had enough sense to hold his tongue till the usual hour, but even after a couple of rolls in the hay, Marge’s contempt for Noah Weinstein was still going strong.

“His boat!” she exclaimed. “You, you went on his boat? Did anyone see you?”

“Calm down, Marge, it ain’t like you think. We ain’t the only family he’s asked to join him. The O’Leary’s, they’re coming, too. Mark and Cindy and the whole gang of them.”

“Cindy’s going?” Marge asked, absorbing the news.

“Sure, and Doug and Carol Walters. And Clyve and Eric.”

“Clyve and Eric? What good are they gonna be?”

“Eric’s gonna help direct the plays, and Clyve’s agreed to design the costumes. It’s not gonna be as gloomy as you’re picturin’ it. Sure, people will be drownin’ all around us, but inside we’ll be havin’ the time of our lives.”

“I don’t know, hon,” Marge said, biting her nails. “If someone from town saw us gettin’ on Noah Weinstein’s boat, why, I don’t think I could ever live it down. I would just die, I’d—”

“Shh,” he said, calming her with his touch. He stroked her hair and cupped her breast, which always seemed to do the trick. Sometimes it paid to be a dairy farmer. “Don’t worry yourself about that none. That’ll all be taken care of. All we need to do is say yes.”

Marge sighed and lowered her head. She seemed to be giving it some real thought, which was all Tom could ask. Whatever they ultimately decided to do, he just wanted to make sure they were on the same page together.

“Is it safe?” she asked after a time. “The boat, I mean. Do you think it’ll float?”

“It sure felt solid to me.”

“Oh, what do you know about solid? You fondle udders all day.”

“But I’m good at it,” he reminded her, and he cupped her other breast for good measure.

“And if I know how to get liquid out of something,” he went on, “it stands to reason I know what’s tight enough to keep it out, too.”

She laughed at his logic, which wasn’t his strongest feature. Nevertheless, she wasn’t so stubborn as to be blind to the reality around them, and after taking his hands into her own, encouraging him to continue with what he was doing, she said, “The water’s up to the porch already. Another day of this and we’ll be flooded out.”

“And it’d sure be a lot more embarrassing to drown to death when we’ve got a better offer on the table. And if it stops raining, and people find out where we’ve been, we can always tell them Abigail talked us into it.”

“People would believe that,” Marge conceded. “People will believe anything when love’s involved.”

Tom leaned over and gave her a kiss. “Sometimes the crazier it sounds the better.”

* * *

The next morning at breakfast Tom and Marge told their daughters about the plan, and that night, as Noah was loading up the larger beasts into the boat, two by two, the Butters snuck on under a pair of flabbergasted elephants. Three days later the whole country flooded over, and Noah's boat set sail.

In the end, the decision to join Noah proved far better than Tom had ever imagined, for not only had he saved his wife and children from drowning, but as it turned out, there was more than one match to be made between the two families. Once shoved together in close quarters, having to eat and work and play side by side, Japheth and Abigail were not the only two to pair up. Not long after the boat had begun to move, Shem and Gypsy expressed their feelings for each other, and soon after that Ham and Florence made their own intentions known. And so on the first day the sun came out, signaling the end of the rain, the Butters and the Weinsteins all joined together on the main deck and had themselves a triple wedding.

It went well, but during the reception, something peculiar happened. One of the O'Leary children happened to hear an unusual noise over all the celebrating and ran up to Noah to give him the news.

"There's someone down there," the child said.

"Down where?" Noah asked, perhaps thinking that his boat had a stowaway.

"Down *there*," the child repeated, and he pointed toward the edge of the boat.

Amazed that anyone might have survived the storm besides them, Tom and Noah raced to the edge and peered over. And there, in the water, on a rowboat not fit for a stream, they found

Jack Olafson, Marty Plowers, and Aleck Winsome fighting the waves. Marty was rowing, Aleck was dumping out water with a bucket, and Jack had his hands cupped around his mouth.

“Well, Noah,” Jack called out, “I sure gotta hand it to you. You were right on this one. We should’ve listened to you. Speaking of which, I don’t suppose you got any room on this here boat of yours for three old beet farmers, do you?”

“Sorry, Jack,” Noah replied, pointing skyward, “but I got orders from upstairs not to let anyone else aboard.”

“How about some sustenance, then?” Aleck shouted up. “We’ll take anything. Scraps if you got ‘em.”

Noah looked knowingly at Tom. “Sure, I got some scraps,” and he sent the O’Leary child inside for a bucket.

When the child came back, he handed the bucket to Tom, who dumped it over the edge with pinpoint accuracy. The scraps fell like stones into the rowboat and knocked holes into the bottom. Aleck did his best to fish out the chunks that hadn’t went plumb through.

“Ain’t hardly any meat here,” he complained, holding up the evidence. “It’s all hooves.”

Tom grinned and turned to Noah. “Boy, I never thought I’d hear Aleck Winsome complain about camel toe.”

The two men laughed and clinked their milk cups together, then they threw their arms around each other’s shoulders and walked back to the reception as Jack, Marty, and Aleck sank into the sea, Marty telling his old joke about winning some and losing some one last time before they drowned.

AUTHOR’S NOTE: *Contrary to popular opinion, the Bible is chock-full of hilarious stories—as long as you’re willing to read between the lines. There’s the story of Adam and Eve, who*

can't seem to keep away from the one tree in an entire paradise that will ruin everything for the rest of mankind, or the story of Lot, whose two daughters get him sopping drunk so he'll sleep with them and get them pregnant. I think what drew me to the flood story was the inherent irony of it. Here we have a god that, in order to make the world a better place, must commit a mass murder—i.e., he must do bad in order to do good. Ultimately what I tried to do was exploit this irony by making the story funny while continuing to remind the reader of the upcoming body count.

Of course, this kind of move makes my story a kind of carnivalesque, a form of satire that makes light of the sacred. In other words, I'm a child of Rabelais, that wily monk who blasphemed left and right for the sake of a good laugh—and, of course, to knock humanity off its high horse. I'm also a big fan of Larry David and Woody Allen, both of whom have found their own hilarious ways of poking fun at the things we hold most dear. Unfortunately, we live in an era where almost everyone takes themselves too seriously, and I'm doing my part to try to turn that around.

AUTHOR BIO: Wolfgang Wright is a novelist, screenwriter, and short story writer from North Dakota. He is the author of the carnivalesque *Me and Gepe* and the forthcoming science fiction novel *Being*. Recently, he underwent an Eastern-style awakening and is now on the path to enlightenment.