

Postcards from the Flood

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NOA^H:
When the Lord comes to you and says, I am about to put an end to all flesh for the earth is filled with lawlessness, how do you respond? It's not like you've asked for this information. The only reason you came outside was to have a smoke; your wife, asleep after making love, has a sensitive nose. You're just being courteous, a good husband—it's the Lord who interrupts.

Do you answer, Yes sir! Oh, very good. That's a fine idea, sir. Shall I be perishing as well? You love the people of this town. You are well-respected in their eyes: a judge, landholder, and father of three. Hearing this news sends the pipe tumbling from your mouth; your face grows wet with tears. To picture everyone dead—the corpses stinking to high heaven—well, it just rips at your heart.

You might plead, There must still be ten good people in the world. The Lord insists, I am surely going to destroy them.

If you can't talk Him out of it, why is He bothering to say anything at all? A chill runs up the back of your legs. You are

the Lord's chosen instrument, favored in his sight. Perhaps he will carry out his punishment through you. If the Hidden One—who must watch men fouling men, men fouling beasts—if He sees evil lurking in human hearts, how much worse a torment might He devise?

So you beg for your wife. She is tender, kind, dim-witted but sincere. You have experience with the law; you make your case, Surely one person cannot administrate the whole earth. It is not good for man to be alone.

You remind the Lord of your three boys: Shem, skilled with hammer and wood; Ham, who can navigate the waters of the Tigris blind; Japeth, the youngest and your favorite, a shepherd without equal—the flocks have nearly doubled under his care. You are their father, having obeyed the decree to fill the earth, unaware this reversal lay ahead.

Yet even as you are talking, your mind begins to wander. You imagine a world of only your family. You imagine your sons—lonely, virile—watching their mother, the last woman on earth, rinse her clothes by a stream. Their red-rimmed eyes follow your wife's hand pouring water over her head to cool herself . . . so you beg for the boys' wives. They're whores, really. Hookers purchased for an evening who stayed on because your fields were high with grain in a year of famine. For these three—not your flesh but the very target of the Lord's anger—you plead, even for them.

And, when you have finished? As the last words leave your lips? The night is still as a frozen lake. You watch the slow drift of the stars turned by unseen hands. The fire has gone out; its smoke, tinny with the odor of green wood, traces a path as it disappears into the sky. Your ears ring with the sound of your own shallow breath.

When the Lord says, Build yourself an ark of gopher wood, you fall on your face. You pour handfuls of dirt down your throat. You bloody your knees in supplication. You can't ask for everyone.

What you do is show gratitude. And weep.

H^{AM:} He was a drunk! It wasn't something we talked about. You have to understand. We were meant to be a model family. But the old man couldn't go a week without a tippie. On the third day of the deluge, he passed out on the ark's up-most deck. We had barely begun to lift him off the ground and already the backs of his legs were darkened with shit—at six hundred! A grown man!

I washed him off with a rag, then rinsed the floor. And when he sobered up, did he thank me? No, he was embarrassed I had seen him naked. He sent me deep below, shamefaced, to sweep the stalls of the pigs.

So by the time we landed and got the first good harvest and I found him asleep outside his tent, I was cautious. My wife was with me, she can attest to this. Our plan was simply to shove him into bed—my mother couldn't do it by herself anymore. This was the first bender he'd been on in months; he was drinking to forget. Every night on the ark—his room was next to mine—he would cry himself to sleep.

When we rolled him over, we discovered his robes were open. My wife first noticed Dad's member and let out a little gasp. I didn't want to look, but my wife made me clean off the old man. And do you know what the fool had done? He'd clipped the skin of his own root. It looked like a thumb with the fingernail torn off, bloody, swollen. The sharpened rock was still in his hand.

My wife had once seen a man so trimmed. He was from the very end of the earth with skin the color of baked clay. He would visit her, cover her face with veils and address her in unfamiliar tongue by an unknown woman's name.

"This isn't right," I said. I refused to put him in bed. I wanted to show my brothers, Here's another of our father's delusions. I was trying to protect our family, you have to understand. The old man was getting reckless. His character had grown weak. Soon, I feared, he'd be taking the knife to us.

Y^{HWH}
(Declined to be interviewed.)

J^{APETH'S WIFE:} Noah's wife rounded up the girls and I, the partner of her favorite, she gave the worst of the lot: the unclean beasts of the field. (The boys certainly weren't going to touch them.) "I don't even know what they are!" I cried. It was no lie. I was from a good clan up north.

Mummy made me fashion a net out of my prettiest scarf. "You won't need it where we're going," she said with a snort.

"There will still be parties," I said, between tears. My birthday was coming up, for example, before the rain was due. Surely they wouldn't forget?

"Useless," Mummy said. She spit into the dust.

I was lonely before we left. Shem had an ox for a wife; she couldn't appreciate the fine texture of silk. She spent her time cooking and eating. Shem devised a fake wall in the ark to store her dried meats. Ham's wife, who hated me as much as Shem's wife did, starved herself thin. All she ate was the attention of

men. The idea that we'd be the only ones left alive! Well, she ground her teeth in her sleep. Soon she would become the most beautiful woman on the planet, but who would care?

I put the animal-catching off and invited my friends over for tea. We spent the afternoon applying rouge to our cheekbones. It was all the rage in town. Bunny was braiding my hair when I let slip about the ark.

She laughed it off. "My father says it's impossible. He can see the rains are coming too, but to cover the whole earth?" Her father was the high priest of a very important temple. "Who would the gods get to serve them? They need meat, honey, wine. They're too greedy for that."

I rubbed some cream over my hands. She didn't understand the Lord. I didn't either, exactly.

"Besides," Bunny continued, "We have the fishing boat and our house in the mountains." She checked a nail. "It'll be fine."

From my window, I could see the sky darkening.

I spent days in my bedroom, crying about my lost friends. My husband Japeth, the goody-goody, was no help. He had tender hands and a woman's pretty face but when you got right down to it, he had the same cold heart as his brothers.

"It's not like they don't deserve it," he said, trying to comfort me. At our wedding, we had a receiving line that stretched out beyond what the eye could see. It took hours just to say thank you to all the people who attended. And the gifts? To think they would be destroyed too! I was inconsolable.

The day before the rains began, Mummy came to me in a fit of rage. "You greedy little girl," she cried. "You haven't gathered a single animal!" She grabbed me by the ear and dragged me out.

I could see the rotting teeth in the back of her mouth. She said, "If you don't get them on the boat, I will leave you to die."

I couldn't help it. I wet myself with fear.

"You fool!" She hit me upside the head. "They'll smell you coming now!"

She pushed me toward the thicket where my brothers-in-law felled game. I had to find something, quickly, to curry favor with the woman. I was desperate—I didn't want to die! My throat was raw but even still, I cried out the name of every god I knew. "Please, please, please, send me unclean beasts!"

Then I heard a rustle in the brush nearby. "Hello?" I said. "Who's there?" I stepped over a fallen tree and saw a beast I could not name. It appeared to be one long muscle: a green worm, except stronger, larger, with eyes that fixed on me, almost in recognition. How curious! It was making an odd noise, *pitter-patter, pitter-patter*, as if a child whistling.

Its tongue darted in and out of its mouth, but that didn't account for the sound. I leaned down and put my ear by its lips. Yes, they were words, gentle words. The beast was speaking! "A gift from the gods!" I cried. "They answered my prayers!" And to think, foolish Mummy wanted me to get the unclean animals. Well, I decided not to tell them about it right away. Why give them the satisfaction? But I knew—I was absolutely sure—such a marvelous creature had to make onto the ark. How boring would the new world be without it? Yes, I decided, I would keep it for a pet and surprise them all.