

Excerpt from
THE BOOK OF GOD

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Abraham

AN OLD MAN entered his tent, dropping the door flap behind him. In the darkness he knelt slowly before a clay firepot, very tired. He blew on a coal until it glowed, then he bore the spark to the wick of a saucer lamp. It made a soft nodding flame. The man's face was lean and wounded and streaked with the dust of recent travel. He began to unroll a straw mat for sleeping but paused halfway, lost in thought.

Altogether the tent was rectangular, sewn of goatskins and everywhere patched with fresher skins of the goat. Across the middle a reed screen hung from three poles, dividing the space into two compartments, one for the man, one for his wife. These two were all that dwelt in the tent. There were neither children nor grandchildren. There never had been.

A vagrant wind slapped the side of the tent so that it billowed inward, but the man didn't move. He was gazing into the finger-flame of the lamp.

Old man. Perhaps eighty years old. Nevertheless, this present weariness did not come from age. In fact, the man had a small wiry body as light and as tough as leather. Nor was his eye diminished. It watched with a steadfast grey light, awaiting interpretation. It was not an old eye, but a patient one.

Not age, then. Rather, the man was made weary by this day's travel and yesterday's war.

His only relative in the entire land of Canaan—even from the Euphrates River in the east to the Nile in Egypt—was a nephew who had chosen the easier life. Though the old man himself lived in tents, Lot, his nephew, dwelt in the cities of the Jordan valley, the watered places, fertile places, desirable, sweet and green. But lately four kings of the north had attacked and defeated five cities of the valley. One of these was Sodom, the city Lot had chosen. Among the prisoners whom the northern kings carried away, then, was Lot.

As soon as the old man heard that his kinsman had been taken captive, he armed three hundred and eighteen of his own men, mounted donkeys, and pursued the enemy with a light and secret speed. In the night he divided his forces. He surprised the northern kings by striking from two sides at once. He routed them. He drove them home. And all their plunder, all their prisoners he brought back to the cities that had been defeated: Sodom, Gomorrah, Admah, Zeboiim, Zoar. Lot

was free again, and again he chose Sodom for his dwelling—though the men of the place had a reputation for extreme wickedness.

That was yesterday.

Today the king of Sodom had offered the old man all the plunder he'd returned, but the old man refused.

Today the Priest-King Melchizedek had come forth with bread and wine to honor the old man, and he honored him saying:

*Blessed are you!
Blessed, too, be the God most high
who delivers your foe into your hand!*

And today the old man had come back to his tents, again, near the oaks of Mamre, tired.

Today, in the evening, his wife had baked him a barley cake, though he ate scarcely anything and she herself ate nothing at all.

"Is the young man safe, then?" she had asked.

"Yes," he told her.

"And his children?" she said, looking dead level at her husband. "How are the children of the man who lives within the walls of houses?"

"Safe," said the man.

"They are home, then?" she said. "Lot sits contented among his children, then? Lot looks upon the consolation of his old age, then, because he has an uncle who saves him when his own choices get him into trouble?"

The old man said nothing.

"Because he has a good uncle?" she continued. "A generous uncle? An uncle whose wife never did put the first bite of barley cake into the mouth of her own child?"

It was then that the old man arose and left his food unfinished. He trudged through the dusk to his own side of the tent and entered and pulled the flap down behind himself and lit the lamp and fell to staring at the single flame, the straw mat only half unrolled in front of him. He was very tired. He was kneeling, sitting back on his heels. He maintained that same posture, unwinking, unsleeping, through the entire first watch of the night. All sound had long since ceased outside. The encampment slept. His wife, finally, had fallen asleep on the other side of the reed screen. She was sleeping alone.

Then, in the middle of that night, God spoke.

Fear not, Abram, God said, calling the old man by name. I am your shield. Your reward shall be very great.

Abram did not move. He did not so much as shift his eye from the orange lamp-flame. But his jaw tightened.

God said, *Abram, northward of this place, southward and eastward and westward—all the land as far as you can see I will give to you and to your descendants forever.*

Still motionless and so softly that the wind outside concealed the sound of it even from his own ears, Abram breathed these words: "So you have said. So you have said. But what, O Lord God, can you give us as long as we continue childless?"

A wind took hold of the tent-flap and lifted it like a linen. The lampflame guttered and went out.

God said, *Come. Abram, come outside.*

On his hands and knees the old man obeyed.

God said. *Raise your eyes to heaven. Look to the stars, Abram. Count them. Can you count them?*

The old man said, "No. I cannot count them. They are too many."

Even so many, said the Lord God, *shall be your descendants upon the earth.*

With the same gaze as he had earlier turned upon the lamp-flame Abram gazed toward heaven. Now there was no wind at all. The air was absolutely still. Nothing moved in the land, except that the man could hear the sighing of his old wife inside her compartment.

He said, "Is it required then that a slave born within my household must be my heir?"

God said. *Your own son shall be your heir.*

Abram said, "How shall I know that? How can I know, when you have given us no offspring?"

Then the word of the Lord came to the old man.

Abram? said God. *Have you seen how a king will by a covenant establish his promise with his servant? Tomorrow, Abram. Tomorrow prepare the beasts. I am the Lord who brought you here to give you this land. Tomorrow I will make my covenant with you—and thereby shall you surely know my promises to you!*

ON THE FOLLOWING MORNING the old man rose early. Without an explanation to any in the household, neither to his wife nor to his servants, he took from his herds a heifer, a she-goat, and a ram, all three years old, a turtledove, and a young pigeon.

These beasts he led to high ground, to a bare and lonely place where he tethered them.

Abram bound his robe to his waist and the sleeves to his elbows so that nothing hung loosely. He took a long copper knife and with quick cuts to either side of their necks he slaughtered the animals. They sank down and died without protesting. Then the old man drove the knife into the heifer at the top other breastbone. Mightily he yanked the blade downward, cracking bone, slicing flesh, and cutting the carcass into two separate parts. He did the same for the goat and for the ram, though he did not cut the birds in two.

The halves of each animal Abram laid on the ground opposite each other, creating, as it were, a pathway up through the center of their bodies.

By late afternoon blood and the raw meat had drawn birds of prey to the sky above this lonely place. They circled lower and lower on watchful wings. Finally, in their hunger they dropped and tried to land. But Abram ran at them, shouting and waving his arms. The old man exhausted himself that day, driving the great raptor birds back from the carrion, protecting the animals of the covenant of God.

But then as the sun was going down it was more than mere weariness that came upon him. A deep sleep seized Abram. Dread and a marvelous darkness swept over him, and he sank to the ground, helpless. When the sun was altogether gone and the whole world had descended into perfect night, there came a smoking firepot sailing through the dark—a furnace of smoke and a flaming torch. As they passed between the halves of the animals, the Lord God made a covenant with Abram, saying, *To your descendants I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates, the land of the Kenites, the Kenizzites, the Kadmonites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Rephaim, the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Girgashites and the Jebusites.*

WHEN ABRAM RETURNED to his tents the following day, he bathed himself carefully and buried his clothes.

But he told no one where he had gone or what he had done or why he'd come back caked with dried blood.

II

SARAI, FOR HER PART, was even more anxious than her husband regarding the promises of God. Abram had already entered his eighty-fifth year, and she herself was seventy-five.

And lo, O Lord: we are as childless as the day you first gave hope to my husband and me!

That hope had been planted a full ten years ago. Sarai was intensely aware of time. She had suffered the passage of every barren month since the coming of the promises of God. For the Lord had said to Abram, *I will make of you a great nation.* But a nation begins with the birth of one child.

Where is this child? Often the old woman placed her hands upon her sunken belly and thought, *Where is my child?*

SARAI ADMITTED THAT she had been unrestrained in laughter and dancing when the Lord God interrupted their quiet lives. It became the gossip of their city—"Old Sarai thinks she will bear a baby yet!"—and it might have been an embarrassment to Abram, if he had not already planned to leave.

They were living in Haran at the time, far to the north of this dry place, on the river Balik. Not in tents, in houses. Family and friends surrounded them, and though they were childless, by the time Abram was in his seventies they seemed content. Long ago Sarai had ceased to speak of children. She sincerely believed that she had accepted her sad fate.

But one night Abram came and woke her, his face ashen, his eyes smoky and enormous, his voice ghostly.

"Sarai, Sarai," he whispered, "prepare to leave."

"Leave? Where? Is your father sick again?"

Terah was failing in those years, often calling his son to his side.

Abram did not acknowledge the question. He looked like a blackened candle wick, rigid and breakable. "The Lord God has commanded me to go to a land which he will show me. Sarai," the man said, his voice issuing from his throat like wind from a cave, "he has made marvelous promises. He says he will make of me a great nation, and bless me, and make my name great so that I will be a blessing. *I will bless those who bless you, he said. And him who curses you I will curse. By you all the families of the earth shall bless themselves.* Sarai, get ready. We've got to go—"

And then when Abram had departed into the night, Sarai began to pant. She bowed her head and covered her face with both hands and burst into tears. *A great nation starts with a single child!*

Sarai, Abram's wife, was going to have a baby.

She could scarcely stand the sweetness low in her womb. A baby! Let people gossip about her strange behavior, her impossible expectations. Nothing bothered Sarai now.

Indeed, she traveled from Haran without complaint—she and Abram and his nephew Lot, their servants and their cattle. No matter that no one knew where they were going. The God of her husband was leading them. And a glad anticipation made the old woman young again. Blood flowed brightly in Sarai's face. No matter that they now became wanderers living in tents. No matter that, when Abram and his nephew had to divide their flocks and families, Lot chose houses in the cities of the Jordan valley, while her husband continued to roam in tents. None of this mattered—because she had received the promise of God: she who had been barren was about to bear a baby.

But that was ten years ago.

And the bloom had long since faded in Sarai's face.

Moreover, womanhood was as dead as leather within her, and the miracle itself seemed a withered thing now.

Yet God had aroused the desire inside of Sarai, and it would not lie down and die again. Every night it plucked at her heart: *Where is it? Where is the child of my own womb?* No, Sarai could never again be content with her fate—not after laughter and dancing and trust and all the changes the promise had caused in her life.

Therefore, she took matters into her own hands.

Sarai remembered a custom of Haran, a certain way by which to solve the problem of a woman's barrenness. Perhaps Abram had left most of his past in that land, but the promises of his God must not be left behind, so neither would Sarai leave behind this final chance for a child other own.

"Abram?" she said. "I have an idea."

They were sitting outside and eating supper several days after he had returned all bloody from some private ceremony. He had not explained the blood and she hadn't asked. They were in the latter part of the meal. Sarai had cut a melon into parts for him, and he was eating them slowly.

"What is your idea?" he said.

She cast her eyes to the side, now cutting melon for herself. "I would not object," she said, "if you liked my idea and acted upon it. Another woman might object. I would not. In fact, I would be grateful."

Abram put a sticky finger to his tongue. "What is your idea?" he said.

"You know my maidservant, of course," she said, carefully cutting the rind from her fruit.

"Yes."

"Hagar. The sturdy woman whom we brought north from Egypt. That one. Young, she is. A good servant."

"Yes," said Abram. "I know her. What is your idea?"

"Now, then, are you finished with the melon? Have you had enough?"

Abram simply sat and gazed at his wife.

Finally she laid the pieces of her own fruit aside and wiped her hands and folded them in her lap and lifted her eyes to her husband.

"When certain wives are unable to bear children," she said, "they bring their maidservants to their husbands. They invite their husbands to go in to their maidservants in order that they, the barren wives, might in this manner get children of their own. For if the maid bears a baby upon the knees of her mistress, the baby becomes the child of the mistress. Abram, if you wished to do such a thing with Hagar my maidservant ... I would not object."

For a long time the old man continued to gaze at the old woman. She lowered her eyes.

"It was just an idea," she said.

Abram said, "Bring her to me," and he rose and retired to his room in the tent.

HAGAR THE EGYPTIAN was not pretty. But Sarai always declared her handsome. She'd chosen this one in the first place because she had large hands and large feet, strength, bones like tent stakes. Only recently had Sarai also noted the generous width of Hagar's hips. Room. Wide black eyes, a broad forehead, not much learning, of course—but room.

On the morning after Hagar slept in Abram's compartment, Sarai saw for the first time that Hagar's hair was long and glossy and raven-black. One might call it beautiful. That same morning she commanded her maidservant to cut her hair short. "It has always interfered with your work," she said.

And then she saw that Hagar her maidservant had conceived. The Egyptian's complexion glowed so dark and fiercely that her eyes and teeth were a shock of whiteness. And when she began to show her teeth more and more in smiling, Sarai knew of a certainty that Hagar, too, knew a baby lay in her womb.

Soon another sign proved both Hagar's pregnancy and her awareness: she swaggered. Distinctly, she began to throw her hips left and right when she walked; and she began to look her mistress dead-level in the eyes; and she simply did not do the things Sarai commanded her to do. She never did get around to cutting her hair.

Sarai said, "Hagar, you go and draw the water this morning." But Hagar sighed and said she was tired, turned on her heel, went to Abram's side of the tent, sat down and ate figs.

And grew huge.

One day Sarai and a midwife were demonstrating how a maid might bear the babe on the knees of her mistress. The older woman made a roll of her sleeping mat and reclined against it, her legs thrust straight before her; Hagar sat on Sarai's thighs, leaning back on the old woman's breast, drawing her own legs up as high as she could; the midwife crouched over Sarai's ankles and faced Hagar, reaching down between Hagar's thighs.

"You see?" said Sarai. "The child will come out on my knees. I'll wrap my arms around you, Hagar, and press down on your belly like this—" Hagar cried out and slapped Sarai's hands. "That hurts," she said. She stood up and swaggered out of the tent. Sarai sat stunned. The midwife lowered her face and said nothing.

On the following day, Sarai found Hagar sitting in the shade of Abram's tent with a bowl of figs.

Sarai stood above her. "You struck me," she said.

Hagar said, "Yes, and I told the master, your husband, that I was sorry. So I am sorry. And I told him, too, that you didn't mean to hurt me. It's just that I am soft and you are bony. I think he understands the difference, don't you? I said that maybe I am tender now because I am in the way of women, and that maybe you are rough because you are not."

Sarai opened her mouth to answer but groaned instead—a humiliating sound. So then she shouted her words: "It's your turn to ... get water—"

Hagar said, "I'm sorry. Your husband commanded me to rest. I am obeying Abram."

The next time that Sarai sought to practice the bearing of this infant upon her knees, Hagar said, "Perhaps that won't be necessary anymore."

Straightway Sarai gathered her robe and, like a storm arising from the sea, she went in search of Abram.

This was a country of high grassy hills from which one could see many miles around. Sarai climbed a bald knoll and shaded her eyes and looked for the flocks of her husband, and then for the colors of his garments. He would be among the shepherds today, choosing a lamb with which to trade for a particular luxury in the cities: a baby cradle.

There he was. There was Abram.

Even before she had reached the valley of his flocks, Sarai yelled, "Old man! Old man! May the wrong done to me be upon your head, old man!"

Her flesh was mottled brown by age and the harsh weather. Her hair had grown limp and thin and colorless. Nevertheless, when her body went taut with anger and her eye blazed, Sarai was young again, a warrior.

"The woman whom you embraced," she shouted, "the woman who now has conceived in her Egyptian womb, your maid and my servant—she looks upon me now with contempt," cried Sarai. "I will not abide it, Abram. I will not, and the Lord will have to judge between me and you, therefore!"

Abram stood facing her as she approached. When she paused to draw a breath he said, "She is in your power, Sarai. Do as you please. I won't interfere." Then he returned to his work.

Sarai was left to her own devices. She accepted that as power and freedom, and she became relentless.

From that day forward if Hagar refused to draw water, Sarai commanded two menservants to carry her by the armpits down to the spring and then to carry her back again while she bore the full waterskins however she might. Soon the maid found the strength to go for water on her own.

There were no figs for Hagar now. Nor naps during the day. And Sarai herself cut the Egyptian's hair so close to the skull that the tender skin burned in the sun.

When, finally, Sarai brought the raven-black tresses back to Hagar, together with a stiff linen cap, and required the maid to make of her own long hair a wig; when Sarai announced that she herself would wear the wig on special occasions in company with her husband Abram, Hagar the Egyptian disappeared.

In spite of her condition she ran far away from the tents of Abram—almost to the border of her homeland, Egypt. It was several months before she returned, exhausted, gaunt, but pregnant still.

She told Abram that the angel of the Lord had appeared to her by a spring of water on the way to Shur. The angel had promised her a son: *Name him Ishmael, the angel said, for the Lord has heard your affliction. He shall become a wild ass of a man, yet from him shall come so many descendants that they cannot be numbered for multitude.*

So Hagar bore Abram a son. And he named the baby Ishmael.
But it was not born on Sarai's knees.
Sarai was forced to watch all these things from a distance.
Yet even at a distance she saw the look on her husband's face as he laid the
babe in the crook of his arm: tenderness! The old man's eyes were dewy.

III

THEN THE LORD appeared to Abram and said, *I am El Shaddai. I am God Almighty. Walk before me. Serve me perfectly.*

Immediately, Abram fell on his face.

God said to him, *Behold, my covenant is with you. No longer shall your name be Abram. You are Abraham, for I have made you the father of a multitude of nations, and I will likewise establish my covenant with your descendants after you—an everlasting covenant!*

I give you and your descendants all the land of Canaan—an everlasting possession!

You, Abraham, and every male among you shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskins. It shall be a sign of the covenant between me and you.

As for your wife, Sarai: her name shall be Sarah. I will bless her. I will give you a son by her, and kings and peoples shall come from Sarah.

Abraham said, "Shall Sarah bear a child? Oh, that Ishmael might live in your sight, O Lord!"

God said, *No! Sarah your wife shall bear you a son and I will establish my covenant with him as an everlasting covenant!*

When he had finished saying these things. God went up from Abraham.

Then Abraham took Ishmael his son and all his slaves, every male in his household, and circumcised the flesh of their foreskins that very day, as God had said to him.

IV

ALTHOUGH MAMRE, where Abraham often encamped, was on ground high enough to grow cool in the evening, during a summer's day the heat of the sun could be intolerable. It was Abraham's habit, then, to raise three sides of his tent on poles in order to cast a shade all round his room and to allow the dry wind to

blow through it. Here he would rest in the afternoon, leaning against a straw mat that had been rolled up for his back.

By now the man was ninety-nine years old. He spent the hottest hours of the day dozing. Sometimes his old eye would roll open and he'd watch the oak trees floating in the heat waves; sometimes his eye would close and he would dream; sometimes he'd reach for a waterskin sweating and cooling in the wind.

And so it happened one afternoon that, opening a lazy eye, Abraham saw not trees but people standing by the tent, three men staring down at him. Strangers!

The old man jumped up and bowed down to the ground and said, "Stay a while. Rest a while."

Strangers must also be guests. Therefore, Abraham said, "Sirs, let a little water be brought to wash your feet while I fetch some food for you."

The men said, "Thank you. Do as you have said."

So Abraham went round to Sarah's side of the tent and asked her to make flat cakes of barley meal. He himself ran down to the herds and selected a tender calf for cooking. He roused his household from their afternoon naps and caused a general commotion throughout the encampment.

Finally he returned to his guests and spread goatskins underneath an oak tree and laid out cakes and meat and curds and milk, a generous meal.

He stood to the side and watched while they ate.

When they had finished they said, "Where is your wife? Where is Sarah?"

How could strangers know her name? Her new name! "In the tent," he said.

One of the men dipped his fingers in water to wash them, then leaned against the oak and said, "When I return this way in the spring, your wife Sarah shall be suckling a son."

Abraham felt the hairs on his neck begin to tingle. Suddenly this was not mere dinner conversation. It felt intimate and dangerous.

He was about to respond, when the stranger turned toward the tent and called out, "Sarah! Sarah, why did you laugh?"

A tiny voice in the dark interior said, "I didn't laugh."

The stranger said, "Yes, you did. When I said you would bear a son you laughed in your heart and mumbled. *Shall old age have pleasure anymore?* Woman," said the stranger, "is anything too hard for the Lord?"

Abraham gaped. His heart had begun to race wildly. His mind could scarcely keep pace with events. *The Lord!* This fellow had said. *Is anything too hard for the Lord?*

Once more, louder now but hidden still behind the reed screen of the tent, Sarah said, "I did not laugh!"

The three men were rising up, preparing to travel on. "You did, you know," the more glorious one said. "You laughed."

And then they left. They set out on the long road that descended to the city of Sodom.

For more reasons than he could contemplate, Abraham followed. It was the hospitable thing, surely, to accompany one's guest on his way. But Abraham had recognized in one figure something grander than a guest. By the cold in his bones he suspected that holiness was here. Therefore, Abraham followed, speechless, yet incapable of turning around and going home again.

As dusk darkened the earth, two of the strangers continued down the road alone. The exalted one paused and Abraham, too, stopped.

Then this one spoke in tones transcendent and powerful. It was indeed the Lord who said to Abraham, "The outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah is great. Their sin is very grave. I want to judge whether the accusation is accurate. That is why I am passing this way. That is why I am here."

Abraham glanced south-southwest to the cities in the valley far below. Citizens were lighting the night fires. A hundred tiny fires—they looked like a rash on the earth. Lot lived there.

Abraham closed his eyes and set his jaw. He thought that he should consider carefully his next action, but he could not. He couldn't think at all. He acted.

He said, "Will you destroy the righteous with the wicked?"

The holy figure did not respond.

Abraham wiped his mouth and spoke again. "Suppose there are fifty righteous in the city. Will you spare it for fifty? Surely the judge of all the earth would not slay righteous people because of the wickedness of others."

The Lord said, "If I find fifty righteous in Sodom, I will for their sake spare the city. Yes."

Old Abraham bowed his head and shut his eyes and took a deep breath and spoke. "I know I am but dust and ashes," he said. "But I started to speak and I must finish." He raised his face. "What if there are five less than fifty righteous? Would you destroy the city for lack of five?"

The Lord said, "For forty-five I will spare all."

Abraham said, "Ah, Lord, suppose there are only forty?"

"For forty I will not destroy the city.

"Thirty?"

"If I find thirty righteous I will withhold the punishment."

"What if there are only twenty?"

"And for twenty," said the Lord, "I will spare Sodom."

Abraham discovered that he was breathless, trembling and sweating. But he was not yet finished. "Oh, let not the Lord be angry with me," he said. "I will speak but this once more. Suppose, O Lord, that there are found only ten righteous within the city? What then?"

The Lord said, "For the sake of ten I will not destroy it."

Then the Lord went his way. But Abraham held ground where the dreadful conversation had taken place. He stared down toward Sodom, watching over his nephew Lot. Watching.

LATE THAT SAME EVENING two travelers arrived in Sodom. Lot, who was as hospitable as his uncle Abraham, invited them in and fed them and gave them pallets upon which to sleep.

But soon the men of the city surrounded his house, bellowing: "Bring out your visitors that we may lie with them!"

Lot himself stepped out and shut the door. "I beg you, brothers," he said, "don't act so wickedly. These men are my guests. But I have two daughters who are still virgins—"

The men of Sodom only roared the louder, "Get out of the way, Hebrew!" They rushed forward to break down the door.

But immediately the guests, angels of the Lord, snatched Lot in, shut the door, and by a mystery struck blind the entire company of men outside.

The angels said, "The sin of this city is so grievous that the Lord has sent us to destroy it. If there are any people here that you love," they said, "go now and warn them."

In fact, Lot's daughters were betrothed to men whom he respected. He ran to tell them of the Lord's decision. But they laughed outright at his news and scorned any suggestions he made about escaping. Lot was grieved by the prospect of their destruction.

By dawn, then, the angels actually had to drag him, his wife, and his daughters from their house. They drove them through the city gate, saying, "Run for your lives! Don't look back, don't stop in the valley, run to the hills or you will be consumed! Run!"

IN THE MORNING Abraham stood on a high hill and watched as fire and pitch and a smoking brimstone rained down upon the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. Abraham saw heaven lick the valley black, consuming every breathing thing and every green thing that had ever lived there.

When finally smoke went up from Sodom like the smoke of a furnace, the old man sat down and covered his face and wept. "Not even ten!" he said. "O Lot, God could not find as few as ten righteous people in the city you chose for yourself. Where are you now? Where are your daughters? Where is your wife?"

Lot and his daughters were safe in caves. But while they were fleeing the fire, his wife had stopped for a last glance at the city and in that instant had turned into a standing pillar of salt.

SOON AFTER THE DESTRUCTION of Sodom, Abraham struck camp and traveled south into the Negev. Near Gerar he found new pasture for his flocks, so he stayed a while.

In the fall he and his men sheared the sheep, causing a daylong bawling from the terrified creatures while the women washed the fleeces clean of dirt and oils.

They combed the wool out and packed it in bales. During the winter Abraham's household transported it to the city of Gerar and bartered for articles of copper and bronze, tools, utensils, weapons, pottery—and perhaps something pretty for one's wife if she were about to have a baby.

In the spring the sheep dropped new lambs.

And then the Lord kept his promise to Sarah.

In the small cool hours of a morning, Sarah bore Abraham a boy. The midwife brought the infant outside—a wiry, watchful child—and Abraham could not speak. The old man took the baby and gazed upon skin as fresh as petals—but he could not utter a word.

Eight days later, Abraham circumcised his son with a sharp flint knife. Then he made a great feast, gathering together his whole household to eat and drink and celebrate with him.

And before the day was over, Sarah's joy grew too great to be contained. The old woman laughed. She covered her face and laughed soundlessly, so that the entire company fell silent thinking she was crying. But then she rose up and clapped her hands and sang: "God has made laughter for me! Oh, laugh with me! Let everyone who hears my story laugh! Sisters, sisters, where was your faith? Who guessed yesterday that Sarah would suckle a child today? Yet I have borne my husband an heir in his old age."

Abraham stood to the side watching his wife. Now he went to her and took one of her hands in his own and held it until she stood still and returned his gaze. They were a small, wiry pair beneath the blue firmament.

Then Abraham looked down at Sarah's hand, this cluster of tendons and bone. One by one he touched the brown spots on the back of it. "Old woman, old woman, more precious than rubies," he murmured, "we will name the child for laughter. We will call him Isaac."

She was ninety years old. He was one hundred.

VI

AT THE BIRTH of Ishmael years ago, Abraham had given Hagar her own tent in which to train and raise the boy. Hagar's tent never had pride of place. It was always pitched some distance from Abraham and Sarah's. And through the years Hagar, too, chose to keep distance between herself and the mistress of the household.

Abraham observed the choice and understood.

But privately he watched Ishmael grow into a youth of a nearly animal independence and dark intensities. Though he never spoke the thought aloud, it pleased Abraham to see the lad's spirit emerge both free and eager. On the other hand, it troubled him that the same spirit was wearing Hagar down. Large hands,

large feet, her body was rawboned still; but her heart was tired and her mind uncertain.

IT WAS JUST after Isaac had been weaned and Sarah's breasts were again flat and forever dry, that she came to Abraham among the flocks.

"Cast out," Sarah cried as she approached him, "cast out that slave and her son!" Abraham turned to face his wife.

She didn't wait for response, but kept talking and coming at once. "I saw that Egyptian's wild whelp playing with little Isaac. There was absolutely no reverence there. None! I saw the future, Abraham, and I won't have it! The son of that slave woman shall not be heir with my son Isaac!"

Abraham said, "He is my son, too."

Sarah stood dead still, staring at Abraham. A little wind tugged at her colorless hair. Her voice, when she spoke, took on a husky quality. She uttered her words with individual softness and care. "Which of these sons," she said, "did the Lord God promise? And which did the Lord God give?"

So Abraham rose early the following morning and carried bread and a skin of water down to Hagar's tent. He spoke a word to her, then put his few provisions on her shoulder and sent her away with the child.

So Hagar and Ishmael went wandering in the wilderness.

BUT ISAAC GREW into a comely youth, a son of genuine respect and obedience, the blessing upon his father's old age. Abraham gave his heart completely to the boy.

There were days when the man would take Isaac with him to a high promontory and show him not only the tents, the servants, the flocks and herds of his household, but also the land as far as the lad could see, north and south, east and west.

"I, when I die," Abraham would say, "will give you the tents, my son. But God will give you the land."

The old man loved his son so deeply that he was like life inside his bones.

But then God said, *Abraham*.

The man said, "Here I am."

And God said, *Take your son Isaac to a mount in Moriah and offer him there as a burnt offering to me.*

In the evening Abraham carried his straw mat to a private place and unrolled it on a hill. All night he lay gazing up at the stars.

Early in the morning he returned to the tents and cut wood. He saddled a donkey. He asked two servants to accompany him on a journey he was about to make, then he entered Sarah's side of the tent and touched his son to waken him.

"Come," he whispered. "Don't disturb your mother. Come."

So they left the encampment together.

They traveled for three days in a northerly direction.

On the third day the old man lifted his eyes and saw the place of sacrifice afar off.

He said to the servants, "Wait here. The boy and I will go ahead and worship the Lord and then come back to you."

Abraham took the wood and laid it on the back of his son. In his left hand the man bore fire. In his right, the knife. So they walked together toward Moriah.

Isaac said, "Father?"

Abraham said, "Here I am, my son."

Isaac said, "We have the fire and the wood for our sacrifice, but where is the lamb?"

"Ah, the lamb," said Abraham. And then he said, "God will provide." So they continued forward, climbing the side of Moriah together.

When they came to the place, Abraham bent and built an altar. Wiry and silent, the old man laid wood on the altar. Then he bound Isaac his son and lifted him up and laid him on the altar, too, upon the wood.

So then Abraham bound his robe to his waist that nothing hung loosely, and with his left hand he touched the boy at the breastbone, and with his right hand he picked up a long copper knife and raised it very high in order to kill the boy with a single thrust.

Abraham! Abraham! It was the Lord God calling. *Abraham!*

"Here I am," the old man cried.

God said. *Enough. Do not hurt the boy. I know now that you fear God since you did not withhold your only son from me.*

Abraham lifted his eyes and saw a ram caught in a thicket by his horns. So he went and took the ram and offered it up as a burnt offering instead of his son. And he called the name of that place The Lord Shall Provide.

And the Lord said, *I will indeed bless you. I will multiply your descendants as the stars of heaven, and by them shall all the nations of the earth be blessed—for you have obeyed my voice.*

AFTER THESE THINGS Sarah lived to be a hundred and twenty-seven years old. Abraham was again abiding near the oaks of Mamre. It was there that his old wife died.

Before he spoke the word to anyone else, Abraham sat by her bed for a night and a morning, weeping. He held her hand until it grew cold, and then he laid it by her tiny frame.

At noon he arose and went forth to find a place to bury his dead.

There was a field in Machpelah east of Mamre, owned by a man named Ephron, in which there was a cave. Abraham bartered with Ephron until he agreed

to sell his field at a price of four hundred shekels of silver. In the presence of many witnesses the payment was weighed out and the sale made.

So the field belonged to Abraham. He carried his wife Sarah to his small property and brought her into the cave and buried her there.

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