

The Binding of Isaac

1

Abraham is caught in a dilemma. In parable, he must sacrifice his beloved son, even if a substitute should miraculously appear, bleating, within the thicket. In fact, however, the command is obviously demonic and he must refuse. In parable, he is a paragon of wisdom; but he is a homicidal maniac in fact.

It's as if someone were to reach out toward the face in the mirror and, with two-dimensional silvered-glass fingers, touched warm flesh.

2

As he grew up, Isaac remembered everything but the terror. He could still feel the weight of the firewood as he unstrapped it from the donkey's back, could still smell the crisp, pine-scented autumn air, could hear the two sets of footsteps crunching the pebbles on the trail up Mount Moriah. But not the final moment; he had long since forgotten that: the moment when he waited, trussed up on the altar, the carving knife quivering against his breast, his father's huge eyes above him, exalted and horrible. Over the years, as his own eyesight grew dim, the nightmare gradually acquired the details of a pious legend. The demented thought became a heavenly command. The distorted features became an expression of infinite fatherly concern. The abrupt awakening became a miraculous, last-minute reprieve from a God who was only testing, after all.

Whatever experiences we cannot bear to be conscious of, we must repeat in all their anguish. Thus Isaac grows blind. He is betrayed by his wife and younger son. He goes to the grave a disappointed, frightened old man, perhaps with blue numbers etched onto his right arm. It will take much hard work, many hundreds of rebirths, before he is ready to have the last laugh.