

Prologue

One day the hand of a god . . .

Tim sat cross-legged on the floor of his room, staring fascinated at the life that teemed within a column of early morning sunlight. It was a special world, that sunbeam—a world you could enter and disrupt but never belong to. The boy passed his hand through it and watched a swarm of golden sparks hurry out of its way, and he imagined them thinking, *“What was that, what was that?”* But after a moment the excitement subsided, and they resumed their dreamy wandering. Had this astounding event already been forgotten in their world, or would tales of it be told for generations? *One day, the hand of a god crashed through the world, sweeping us all into turmoil and panic. . . .*

In two months—an infinitude of time to him—the boy would enter kindergarten. He understood the significance of this event with great clarity. No one had explained it; he’d worked it out for himself, over the winter. He’d had to, in order to understand the great crime he’d committed just before Christmas. He had told JoJo, the three-year-old next door, that there is no Santa Claus. She had been shattered, heart-broken, and her parents had reacted as if he’d plunged a knife into her body. He was in disgrace for weeks—plenty of time to work it all out.

It’s important (or perhaps even necessary) to keep small children in the dark about things—big things, little things: all things. It’s important to deceive, to confuse, to pretend ignorance, to avoid a plain answer to a direct question. It’s even important to promote lies where no questions are asked, as in the case of Santa Claus. By divulging the truth to JoJo, the boy had disrupted the plan, had committed a crime of cosmic proportions.

Everyone collaborated in the deception—even older children. And the boy would soon understand why. As a kindergartner, he would become one of the older children, and the age of secrecy and lies would be behind him forever. This, he was sure, was the threshold he’d be crossing in two months. He would be entering a world where one is shaped by the unfolding of mysteries hidden from the eyes of the very young. Older kids naturally pretended it was nothing—a bore and a drag. This was only to be expected; it was part of the plan. He wondered if he would agree to collaborate with them in the pretense. It would depend on the explanation he was given for it.

The boy’s hand swam again through the living beam of light, and he thought contemptuously: Dust. His father had told him the sparks that live in the light are particles of dust. An obvious lie. Another obvious lie among multitudes he’d been told.

For him, the two months ahead seemed like two years.

He closed his hand gently around a cluster of glowing motes, knowing they couldn’t be captured and taken out of their beam of light. He wondered if they passed through the flesh of his hand to escape or simply flowed around his fingers.

He opened his hand, his fingers together, and instantly a whole colony of sparkles was snuffed out in a column of shadow within the sunbeam. He turned his hand sideways, and a new generation was born to cavort in the light. But this generation only lived a moment, as some larger shadow outside swept them into nothingness.

The boy looked up from the floor and was startled to see a man standing at the window. Not exactly a man, maybe, since his massive, heavy-browed head sported snake-like horns, and his skin was strangely mottled. The boy stood up to have a closer look, and the creature outside watched him solemnly, with the eyes of a large, intelligent animal. They stared at each other in stillness and silence, and the boy felt he’d never been looked at with such intensity and penetration.

The bones of the man’s face molded it into an expression of complete ambiguity—half a thunderous scowl and half an animal’s grin, so that the boy didn’t know whether to be frightened or delighted. The man seemed enormously proud of his colorful, strangely twisted horns, but the oddest thing about the creature—or man, if he was a man—was his clothing. A man with horns somehow shouldn’t be dressed in an ordinary tan shirt and jeans.

Wanting his mother to come see him, Tim ran to the kitchen and said, “There’s a man outside.”

“A man?” his mother asked, drying her hands on a dish towel.

“He’s got a face sort of like an animal and he has horns.”

Ellen Kennesey smiled indulgently. “There’s no man outside.”

“There is! He’s standing right outside my window!”

“You imagined it.”

For a moment the boy stared at her, thunderstruck. He’d *imagined* it? She had never accused him of imagining things when he’d seen a praying mantis or a bull snake or a falling star. But now, for some reason, he was *imagining* things?

Then he understood, and his indignation was transformed into a bitter resignation. The creature he’d seen at the window belonged to that infinitely large world of things to be lied about to children. She knew perfectly well what the thing was, but she wasn’t allowed to tell him. She wouldn’t come to his room to look at it, because then she’d be forced to invent still more lies to answer his questions. It was easiest to put him off with a single, unanswerable lie: he’d imagined it.

At the age of four and a half, he’d learned a profound and unforgettable truth:

There is a lie to be told about everything.