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an excerpt of

*A Fable Containing a Reflection the Size
of a Match Head in Its Pupil*

Once there was a city where people did not look one another in the eye. It had been that way for as long as anyone could remember. Old married couples lowered their heads like swans as they sat on park benches together. Young mothers stared sweetly at the folds of their babies' necks. Whenever two people met in conversation, each would rest his gaze on the blank surface of the other's shirt, and though occasionally, in a fit of daring, the most intimate of lovers might go so far as to watch each other's lips move, to venture any higher was considered the gravest of social transgressions.

The people who lived in the city were no less curious about one another than you and I. They had the same longings, the same anxieties, the same slowly building affections that seemed to take their hearts over little by little like waves spilling across a beach, but at some point in the distant past the belief had grown among them that eye contact was dangerous. Every child was taught that the eye was where the spark of life was located. That spark was always hungry, they learned, and it fed on the things it saw. It stood to reason, then, that to look into someone else's eye was to risk having your spark consumed—if not devoured in a single swallow then eaten away a piece at a time. The common understanding among the inhabitants of the city was that people were born with only a small amount of life in their eyes, and that when it emptied out it could not be replenished. One thing they were certain of above all others: just as staring into the sun would eventually steal their sight, so, too, staring into another pair of eyes would eventually steal their souls.