

# THE GIVER

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## Six

“LILY, *PLEASE* HOLD still,” Mother said again.  
Lily, standing in front of her, fidgeted impatiently. “I can tie them myself,”  
she complained. “I  
always have.”

“I know that,” Mother replied, straightening the hair ribbons on the little  
girl’s braids. “But I also  
know that they constantly come loose and more often than not, they’re  
dangling down your back by  
afternoon. Today, at least, we want them to be neatly tied and to *stay* neatly  
tied.”

“I don’t like hair ribbons. I’m glad I only have to wear them one more year,”  
Lily said irritably.

“Next year I get my bicycle, too,” she added more cheerfully.  
“There are good things each year,” Jonas reminded her. “This year you get to  
start your volunteer  
hours. And remember last year, when you became a Seven, you were so  
happy to get your front  
buttoned jacket?”

The little girl nodded and looked down at herself, at the jacket with its row of  
large buttons that  
designated her as a Seven. Fours, Fives, and Sixes all wore jackets that  
fastened down the back so  
that they would have to help each other dress and would learn  
interdependence.

The front-buttoned jacket was the first sign of independence, the first very  
visible symbol of  
growing up. The bicycle, at Nine, would be the powerful emblem of moving  
gradually out into the  
community, away from the protective family unit.

Lily grinned and wriggled away from her mother. “And this year you get  
your Assignment,” she  
said to Jonas in an excited voice. “I hope you get Pilot. And that you take me  
flying!”

“Sure I will,” said Jonas. “And I’ll get a special little parachute that just fits  
you, and I’ll take you

up to, oh, maybe twenty thousand feet, and open the door, and—”

“*Jonas*,” Mother warned.

“I was only joking,” Jonas groaned. “I don’t want Pilot, anyway. If I get Pilot I’ll put in an appeal.”

“Come on,” Mother said. She gave Lily’s ribbons a final tug. “Jonas? Are you ready? Did you take your pill? I want to get a good seat in the Auditorium.” She prodded Lily to the front door and Jonas followed.

It was a short ride to the Auditorium, Lily waving to her friends from her seat on the back of

Mother’s bicycle. Jonas stowed his bicycle beside Mother’s and made his way through the throng to find his group.

The entire community attended the Ceremony each year. For the parents, it meant two days holiday from work; they sat together in the huge hall. Children sat with their groups until they went, one by one, to the stage.

Father, though, would not join Mother in the audience right away. For the earliest ceremony, the

Naming, the Nurturers brought the newchildren to the stage. Jonas, from his place in the balcony with the Elevens, searched the Auditorium for a glimpse of Father. It wasn’t at all hard to spot the

Nurturers’ section at the front; coming from it were the wails and howls of the newchildren who sat

squirming on the Nurturers’ laps. At every other public ceremony, the audience was silent and

attentive. But once a year, they all smiled indulgently at the commotion from the little ones waiting to receive their names and families.

Jonas finally caught his father’s eye and waved. Father grinned and waved back, then held up the

hand of the newchild on his lap, making it wave, too. It wasn’t Gabriel. Gabe was back at the Nurturing Center today, being cared for by the night crew.

He had been given an unusual and special reprieve from the committee, and granted an additional year of nurturing before his Naming and Placement. Father had gone before the committee with a plea on behalf of Gabriel, who had not yet gained the weight appropriate to his days of life nor begun to sleep soundly enough at night to be placed with his family unit. Normally such a newchild would be labeled Inadequate and released from the community. Instead, as a result of Father's plea, Gabriel had been labeled Uncertain and given the additional year. He would continue to be nurtured at the Center and would spend his nights with Jonas's family unit. Each family member, including Lily, had been required to sign a pledge that they would not become attached to this little temporary guest, and that they would relinquish him without protest or appeal when he was assigned to his own family unit at next year's Ceremony. At least, Jonas thought, after Gabriel was placed next year, they would still see him often because he would be part of the community. If he were released, they would not see him again. Ever. Those who were released—even as newchildren—were sent Elsewhere and never returned to the community.

Father had not had to release a single newchild this year, so Gabriel would have represented a real failure and sadness. Even Jonas, though he didn't hover over the little one the way Lily and his father did, was glad that Gabe had not been released.

The first Ceremony began right on time, and Jonas watched as one after another each newchild was given a name and handed by the Nurturers to its new family unit. For some, it was a first child. But many came to the stage accompanied by another child beaming with pride to receive a little brother or sister, the way Jonas had when he was about to be a Five.

Asher poked Jonas's arm. "Remember when we got Phillipa?" he asked in a loud whisper. Jonas nodded. It had only been last year. Asher's parents had waited quite a long time before applying for a second child. Maybe, Jonas suspected, they had been so exhausted by Asher's lively foolishness that they had needed a little time.

Two of their group, Fiona and another female named Thea, were missing temporarily, waiting with their parents to receive newchildren. But it was rare that there was such an age gap between children in a family unit.

When her family's ceremony was completed, Fiona took the seat that had been saved for her in the row ahead of Asher and Jonas. She turned and whispered to them, "He's cute. But I don't like his name very much." She made a face and giggled. Fiona's new brother had been named Bruno. It wasn't a *great* name, Jonas thought, like—well, like Gabriel, for example. But it was okay.

The audience applause, which was enthusiastic at each Naming, rose in an exuberant swell when one parental pair, glowing with pride, took a male newchild and heard him named Caleb.

This new Caleb was a replacement child. The couple had lost their first Caleb, a cheerful little Four. Loss of a child was very, very rare. The community was extraordinarily safe, each citizen watchful and protective of all children. But somehow the first little Caleb had wandered away unnoticed, and had fallen into the river. The entire community had performed the Ceremony of Loss together, murmuring the name Caleb throughout an entire day, less and less frequently, softer in volume, as the long and somber day went on, so that the little Four seemed to fade away gradually from everyone's consciousness.

Now, at this special Naming, the community performed the brief Murmur-of-  
Replacement

Ceremony, repeating the name for the first time since the loss: softly and slowly at first, then faster and with greater volume, as the couple stood on the stage with the newchild sleeping in the mother's arms. It was as if the first Caleb were returning.

Another newchild was given the name Roberto, and Jonas remembered that Roberto the Old had

been released only last week. But there was no Murmur-of-Replacement Ceremony for the new little

Roberto. Release was not the same as Loss.

He sat politely through the ceremonies of Two and Three and Four, increasingly bored as he was each year. Then a break for midday meal—served outdoors—and back again to the seats, for the

Fives, Sixes, Sevens, and finally, last of the first day's ceremonies, the Eights.

Jonas watched and cheered as Lily marched proudly to the stage, became an Eight and received the identifying jacket that she would wear this year, this one with smaller buttons and, for the first time, pockets, indicating that she was mature enough now to keep track of her own small belongings. She

stood solemnly listening to the speech of firm instructions on the responsibilities of Eight and doing volunteer hours for the first time. But Jonas could see that Lily, though she seemed attentive, was looking longingly at the row of gleaming bicycles, which would be presented tomorrow morning to the Nines.

Next year, Lily-billy, Jonas thought.

It was an exhausting day, and even Gabriel, retrieved in his basket from the Nurturing Center, slept soundly that night.

Finally it was the morning of the Ceremony of Twelve.

Now Father sat beside Mother in the audience. Jonas could see them applauding dutifully as the

Nines, one by one, wheeled their new bicycles, each with its gleaming  
nametag attached to the back,  
from the stage. He knew that his parents cringed a little, as he did, when  
Fritz, who lived in the  
dwelling next door to theirs, received his bike and almost immediately  
bumped into the podium with  
it. Fritz was a very awkward child who had been summoned for chastisement  
again and again. His  
transgressions were small ones, always: shoes on the wrong feet, schoolwork  
misplaced, failure to  
study adequately for a quiz. But each such error reflected negatively on his  
parents' guidance and  
infringed on the community's sense of order and success. Jonas and his  
family had not been looking  
forward to Fritz's bicycle, which they realized would probably too often be  
dropped on the front  
walk instead of wheeled neatly into its port.  
Finally the Nines were all resettled in their seats, each having wheeled a  
bicycle outside where it  
would be waiting for its owner at the end of the day. Everyone always  
chuckled and made small jokes  
when the Nines rode home for the first time. "Want me to show you how to  
ride?" older friends would  
call. "I know you've never been on a bike before!" But invariably the  
grinning Nines, who in  
technical violation of the rule had been practicing secretly for weeks, would  
mount and ride off in  
perfect balance, training wheels never touching the ground.  
Then the Tens. Jonas never found the Ceremony of Ten particularly  
interesting—only time  
consuming, as each child's hair was snipped neatly into its distinguishing cut:  
females lost their  
braids at Ten, and males, too, relinquished their long childish hair and took  
on the more manly short  
style which exposed their ears.  
Laborers moved quickly to the stage with brooms and swept away the  
mounds of discarded hair.

Jonas could see the parents of the new Tens stir and murmur, and he knew that this evening, in many dwellings, they would be snipping and straightening the hastily done haircuts, trimming them into a neater line. Elevens. It seemed a short time ago that Jonas had undergone the Ceremony of Eleven, but he remembered that it was not one of the more interesting ones. By Eleven, one was only waiting to be Twelve. It was simply a marking of time with no meaningful changes. There was new clothing: different undergarments for the females, whose bodies were beginning to change; and longer trousers for the males, with a specially shaped pocket for the small calculator that they would use this year in school; but those were simply presented in wrapped packages without an accompanying speech.

Break for midday meal. Jonas realized he was hungry. He and his groupmates congregated by the tables in front of the Auditorium and took their packaged food. Yesterday there had been merriment at lunch, a lot of teasing and energy. But today the group stood anxiously, separate from the other children. Jonas watched the new Nines gravitate toward their waiting bicycles, each one admiring his or her nametag. He saw the Tens stroking their new shortened hair, the females shaking their heads to feel the unaccustomed lightness without the heavy braids they had worn so long.

“I heard about a guy who was absolutely certain he was going to be assigned Engineer,” Asher muttered as they ate, “and instead they gave him Sanitation Laborer. He went out the next day, jumped into the river, swam across, and joined the next community he came to. Nobody ever saw him again.”

Jonas laughed. “Somebody made that story up, Ash,” he said. “My father said he heard that story when *he* was a Twelve.”



But Asher wasn't reassured. He was eyeing the river where it was visible  
behind the Auditorium.

"I can't even swim very well," he said. "My swimming instructor said that I  
don't have the right  
boyishness or something."

"Buoyancy," Jonas corrected him.

"Whatever. I don't have it. I sink."

"Anyway," Jonas pointed out, "have you ever once known of anyone—I  
mean really known for  
sure, Asher, not just heard a story about it—who joined another community?"

"No," Asher admitted reluctantly. "But you can. It says so in the rules. If you  
don't fit in, you can

apply for Elsewhere and be released. My mother says that once, about ten  
years ago, someone

applied and was gone the next day." Then he chuckled. "She told me that  
because I was driving her

crazy. She threatened to apply for Elsewhere."

"She was joking."

"I know. But it was true, what she said, that someone did that once. She said  
that it was really true.

Here today and gone tomorrow. Never seen again. Not even a Ceremony of  
Release."

Jonas shrugged. It didn't worry him. How could someone not fit in? The  
community was so

meticulously ordered, the choices so carefully made.

Even the Matching of Spouses was given such weighty consideration that  
sometimes an adult who

applied to receive a spouse waited months or even *years* before a Match was  
approved and

announced. All of the factors—disposition, energy level, intelligence, and  
interests—had to

correspond and to interact perfectly. Jonas's mother, for example, had higher  
intelligence than his

father; but his father had a calmer disposition. They balanced each other.

Their Match, which like all

Matches had been monitored by the Committee of Elders for three years  
before they could apply for

children, had always been a successful one.  
Like the Matching of Spouses and the Naming and Placement of  
newchildren, the Assignments  
were scrupulously thought through by the Committee of Elders.  
He was certain that his Assignment, whatever it was to be, and Asher's too,  
would be the right one  
for them. He only wished that the midday break would conclude, that the  
audience would reenter the  
Auditorium, and the suspense would end. As if in answer to his unspoken  
wish, the signal came and the crowd began to move toward the  
doors.