

THE GIVER



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JONAS WATCHED AS his father poured a fresh cup of coffee. He waited. “You know,” his father finally said, “every December was exciting to me when I was young. And it has been for you and Lily, too, I’m sure. Each December brings such changes.”

Jonas nodded. He could remember the Decembers back to when he had become, well, probably a Four. The earlier ones were lost to him. But he observed them each year, and he remembered Lily’s earliest Decembers. He remembered when his family received Lily, the day she was named, the day that she had become a One.

The Ceremony for the Ones was always noisy and fun. Each December, all the newchildren born in the previous year turned One. One at a time—there were always fifty in each year’s group, if none had been released—they had been brought to the stage by the Nurturers who had cared for them since birth. Some were already walking, wobbly on their unsteady legs; others were no more than a few days old, wrapped in blankets, held by their Nurturers.

“I enjoy the Naming,” Jonas said.

His mother agreed, smiling. “The year we got Lily, we knew, of course, that we’d receive our female, because we’d made our application and been approved. But I’d been wondering and wondering what her name would be.”

“I could have sneaked a look at the list prior to the ceremony,” Father confided. “The committee always makes the list in advance, and it’s right there in the office at the Nurturing Center.

“As a matter of fact,” he went on, “I feel a little guilty about this. But I *did* go in this afternoon and looked to see if this year’s Naming list had been made yet. It was right there in the office, and I

looked up number Thirty-six—that's the little guy I've been concerned about—because it occurred to me that it might enhance his nurturing if I could call him by a name. Just privately, of course, when no one else is around.”

“Did you find it?” Jonas asked. He was fascinated. It didn't seem a terribly important rule, but the

fact that his father had broken a rule at all awed him. He glanced at his mother, the one responsible

for adherence to the rules, and was relieved that she was smiling.

His father nodded. “His name—if he makes it to the Naming without being released, of course—is

to be Gabriel. So I whisper that to him when I feed him every four hours, and during exercise and

playtime. If no one can hear me.

“I call him Gabe, actually,” he said, and grinned.

“Gabe.” Jonas tried it out. A good name, he decided.

Though Jonas had only become a Five the year that they acquired Lily and learned her name, he

remembered the excitement, the conversations at home, wondering about her: how she would look,

who she would be, how she would fit into their established family unit. He remembered climbing the

steps to the stage with his parents, his father by his side that year instead of with the Nurturers, since

it was the year that he would be given a newchild of his own.

He remembered his mother taking the newchild, his sister, into her arms, while the document was

read to the assembled family units. “Newchild Twenty-three,” the Namer had read. “Lily.”

He remembered his father's look of delight, and that his father had whispered, “She's one of my

favorites. I was hoping for her to be the one.” The crowd had clapped, and Jonas had grinned. He

liked his sister's name. Lily, barely awake, had waved her small fist. Then they had stepped down to

make room for the next family unit. “When I was an Eleven,” his father said now, “as you are, Jonas, I was very impatient, waiting for the Ceremony of Twelve. It’s a long two days. I remember that I enjoyed the Ones, as I always do, but that I didn’t pay much attention to the other ceremonies, except for my sister’s. She became a Nine that year, and got her bicycle. I’d been teaching her to ride mine, even though technically I wasn’t supposed to.”

Jonas laughed. It was one of the few rules that was not taken very seriously and was almost *always*

broken. The children all received their bicycles at Nine; they were not allowed to ride bicycles

before then. But almost always, the older brothers and sisters had secretly taught the younger ones.

Jonas had been thinking already about teaching Lily.

There was talk about changing the rule and giving the bicycles at an earlier age. A committee was studying the idea. When something went to a committee for study, the people always joked about it.

They said that the committee members would become Elders by the time the rule change was made.

Rules were very hard to change. Sometimes, if it was a very important rule—unlike the one

governing the age for bicycles—it would have to go, eventually, to The Receiver for a decision. The

Receiver was the most important Elder. Jonas had never even seen him, that he knew of; someone in a

position of such importance lived and worked alone. But the committee would never bother The

Receiver with a question about bicycles; they would simply fret and argue about it themselves for

years, until the citizens forgot that it had ever gone to them for study.

His father continued. “So I watched and cheered when my sister, Katya, became a Nine and

removed her hair ribbons and got her bicycle,” Father went on. “Then I didn’t pay much attention to

the Tens and Elevens. And *finally*, at the end of the second day, which seemed to go on forever, it was my turn. It was the Ceremony of Twelve.”

Jonas shivered. He pictured his father, who must have been a shy and quiet boy, for he was a shy and quiet man, seated with his group, waiting to be called to the stage. The Ceremony of Twelve was the last of the Ceremonies. The most important.

“I remember how proud my parents looked—and my sister, too; even though she wanted to be out riding the bicycle publicly, she stopped fidgeting and was very still and attentive when my turn came.

“But to be honest, Jonas,” his father said, “for me there was not the element of suspense that there is with your Ceremony. Because I was already fairly certain of what my Assignment was to be.”

Jonas was surprised. There was no way, really, to know in advance. It was a secret selection,

made by the leaders of the community, the Committee of Elders, who took the responsibility so

seriously that there were never even any jokes made about Assignments.

His mother seemed surprised, too. “How could you have known?” she asked.

His father smiled his gentle smile. “Well, it was clear to me—and my parents later confessed that it

had been obvious to them, too—what my aptitude was. I had always loved the newchildren more than

anything. When my friends in my age group were holding bicycle races, or building toy vehicles or

bridges with their construction sets, or—”

“All the things I do with my friends,” Jonas pointed out, and his mother nodded in agreement.

“I always participated, of course, because as children we must experience all of those things. And I

studied hard in school, as you do, Jonas. But again and again, during free time, I found myself drawn

to the newchildren. I spent almost all of my volunteer hours helping in the Nurturing Center. Of course

the Elders knew that, from their observation.”

Jonas nodded. During the past year he had been aware of the increasing level of observation. In

school, at recreation time, and during volunteer hours, he had noticed the Elders watching him and the other Elevens. He had seen them taking notes.

He knew, too, that the Elders were meeting for long hours with all of the instructors that he and the other Elevens had had during their years of school.

“So I expected it, and I was pleased, but not at all surprised, when my Assignment was announced as Nurturer,” Father explained.

“Did everyone applaud, even though they weren’t surprised?” Jonas asked.

“Oh, of course. They were happy for me, that my Assignment was what I wanted most. I felt very fortunate.” His father smiled.

“Were any of the Elevens disappointed, your year?” Jonas asked. Unlike his father, he had no idea

what his Assignment would be. But he knew that some would disappoint him. Though he respected

his father’s work, Nurturer would not be his wish. And he didn’t envy Laborers at all.

His father thought. “No, I don’t think so. Of course the Elders are so careful in their observations and selections.”

“I think it’s probably the most important job in our community,” his mother commented.

“My friend Yoshiko was surprised by her selection as Doctor,” Father said, “but she was thrilled.

And let’s see, there was Andrei—I remember that when we were boys he never wanted to do

physical things. He spent all the recreation time he could with his construction set, and his volunteer

hours were always on building sites. The Elders knew that, of course. Andrei was given the

Assignment of Engineer and he was delighted.”

“Andrei later designed the bridge that crosses the river to the west of town,” Jonas’s mother said.

“It wasn’t there when we were children.”

“There are very rarely disappointments, Jonas. I don’t think you need to worry about that,” his

father reassured him. “And if there are, you know there’s an appeal process.”

But they all laughed at

that—an appeal went to a committee for study.

“I worry a little about Asher’s Assignment,” Jonas confessed. “Asher’s such *fun*. But he doesn’t

really have any serious interests. He makes a game out of everything.”

His father chuckled. “You know,” he said, “I remember when Asher was a newchild at the

Nurturing Center, before he was named. He never cried. He giggled and

laughed at everything. All of

us on the staff enjoyed nurturing Asher.”

“The Elders know Asher,” his mother said. “They’ll find exactly the right Assignment for him. I

don’t think you need to worry about him. But, Jonas, let me warn you about something that may not

have occurred to you. I know I didn’t think about it until after my Ceremony of Twelve.”

“What’s that?”

“Well, it’s the last of the Ceremonies, as you know. After Twelve, age isn’t important. Most of us

even lose track of how old we are as time passes, though the information is in the Hall of Open

Records, and we could go and look it up if we wanted to. What’s important is the preparation for

adult life, and the training you’ll receive in your Assignment.”

“I know that,” Jonas said. “Everyone knows that.”

“But it means,” his mother went on, “that you’ll move into a new group. And each of your friends

will. You’ll no longer be spending your time with your group of Elevens.

After the Ceremony of

Twelve, you’ll be with your Assignment group, with those in training. No more volunteer hours. No

more recreation hours. So your friends will no longer be as close.”

Jonas shook his head. "Asher and I will always be friends," he said firmly. "And there will still be school."

"That's true," his father agreed. "But what your mother said is true as well. There will be changes." "Good changes, though," his mother pointed out. "After my Ceremony of Twelve, I missed my childhood recreation. But when I entered my training for Law and Justice, I found myself with people who shared my interests. I made friends on a new level, friends of all ages." "Did you still play at all, after Twelve?" Jonas asked.

"Occasionally," his mother replied. "But it didn't seem as important to me." "I did," his father said, laughing. "I still do. Every day, at the Nurturing Center, I play bounce-on-the-knee, and peek-a-boo, and hug-the-teddy." He reached over and stroked Jonas's neatly trimmed hair. "Fun doesn't end when you become Twelve."

Lily appeared, wearing her nightclothes, in the doorway. She gave an impatient sigh. "This is certainly a very *long* private conversation," she said. "And there are certain people waiting for their comfort object."

"Lily," her mother said fondly, "you're very close to being an Eight, and when you're an Eight, your comfort object will be taken away. It will be recycled to the younger children. You should be starting to go off to sleep without it."

But her father had already gone to the shelf and taken down the stuffed elephant which was kept there. Many of the comfort objects, like Lily's, were soft, stuffed, imaginary creatures. Jonas's had been called a bear.

"Here you are, Lily-billy," he said. "I'll come help you remove your hair ribbons."

Jonas and his mother rolled their eyes, yet they watched affectionately as Lily and her father

headed to her sleeping room with the stuffed elephant that had been given to her as her comfort object when she was born. His mother moved to her big desk and opened her briefcase; her work never seemed to end, even when she was at home in the evening. Jonas went to his own desk and began to sort through his school papers for the evening's assignment. But his mind was still on December and the coming Ceremony.

Though he had been reassured by the talk with his parents, he hadn't the slightest idea what

Assignment the Elders would be selecting for his future, or how he might feel about it when the day came.