

Three

"Oh, look!" Lily squealed in delight. "Isn't he cute? Look how tiny he is! And he has funny eyes like yours, Jonas!" Jonas glared at her. He didn't like it that she had mentioned his eyes. He waited for his father to chastise Lily. But Father was busy unstrapping the carrying basket from the back of his bicycle. Jonas walked over to look.

It was the first thing Jonas noticed as he looked at the newchild peering up curiously from the basket. The pale eyes.

Almost every citizen in the community had dark eyes. His parents did, and Lily did, and so did all of his group members and friends. But there were a few exceptions: Jonas himself, and a female Five who he had noticed had the different, lighter eyes. No one mentioned such things; it was not a rule, but was considered rude to call attention to things that were unsettling or different about individuals. Lily, he decided, would have to learn that soon, or she would be called in for chastisement because of her insensitive chatter.

Father put his bike into its port. Then he picked up the basket and carried it into the house. Lily followed behind, but she glanced back over her shoulder at Jonas and teased, "Maybe he had the same Birthmother as you."

Jonas shrugged. He followed them inside. But he had been startled by the newchild's eyes. Mirrors were rare in the community; they weren't forbidden, but there was no real need of them, and Jonas had simply never bothered to look at himself very often even when he found himself in a location where a mirror existed. Now, seeing the newchild and its expression, he was reminded that the light eyes were not only a rarity but gave the one who had them a certain look—what was it? Depth, he decided; as if one were looking into the clear water of the river, down to the bottom, where things might lurk which hadn't been discovered yet. He felt self-conscious, realizing that he, too, had that look.

detail
about the
eyes

He went to his desk, pretending not to be interested in the newchild. On the other side of the room, Mother and Lily were bending over to watch as Father unwrapped its blanket.

"What's his comfort object called?" Lily asked, picking up the stuffed creature which had been placed beside the newchild in his basket.

Father glanced at it. "Hippo," he said.

Lily giggled at the strange word. "Hippo," she repeated, and put the comfort object down again. She peered at the unwrapped newchild, who waved his arms.

"I think newchildren are so cute," Lily sighed. "I hope I get assigned to be a Birthmother."

"Lily!" Mother spoke very sharply. "Don't say that. There's very little honor in that Assignment."

"But I was talking to Natasha. You know the Ten who lives around the corner? She does some of her volunteer hours at the Birthing Center. And she told me that the Birthmothers get wonderful food, and they have very gentle exercise periods, and most of the time they just play games and amuse themselves while they're waiting. I think I'd like that," Lily said petulantly.

"Three years," Mother told her firmly. "Three births, and that's all. After that they are Laborers for the rest of their adult lives, until the day that they enter the House of the Old. Is that what you want, Lily? Three lazy years, and then hard physical labor until you are old?"

"Well, no, I guess not," Lily acknowledged reluctantly.

Father turned the newchild onto his tummy in the basket. He sat beside it and rubbed its small back with a rhythmic motion. "Anyway, Lily-billy," he said affectionately, "the Birthmothers never even get to see newchildren. If you enjoy the little ones so much, you should hope for an Assignment as Nurturer."

"When you're an Eight and start your volunteer hours, you can try some at the Nurturing Center," Mother suggested.

"Yes, I think I will," Lily said. She knelt beside the basket. "What did you say his name is? Gabriel? Hello, Gabriel," she said in a singsong voice. Then she giggled. "Oops," she whispered. "I think he's asleep. I guess I'd better be quiet."

Jonas turned to the school assignments on his desk. Some chance of *that*, he thought. Lily was *never* quiet. Probably she should hope for an Assignment as Speaker, so that she could sit in the office with the microphone all day, making announcements. He laughed silently to himself, picturing his sister droning on in the self-important voice that all the Speakers seemed to develop, saying things like, ATTENTION. THIS IS A

REMINDER TO FEMALES UNDER NINE THAT HAIR RIBBONS ARE TO BE NEATLY TIED AT ALL TIMES.

He turned toward Lily and noticed to his satisfaction that her ribbons were, as usual, undone and dangling. There would be an announcement like that quite soon, he felt certain, and it would be directed mainly at Lily, though her name, of course, would not be mentioned. Everyone would know.

Everyone had known, he remembered with humiliation, that the ANNOUNCEMENT ATTENTION. THIS IS A REMINDER TO MALE ELEVENS THAT OBJECTS ARE NOT TO BE REMOVED FROM THE RECREATION AREA AND THAT SNACKS ARE TO BE EATEN, NOT HOARDED had been specifically directed at him, the day last month that he had taken an apple home. No one had mentioned it, not even his parents, because the public announcement had been sufficient to produce the appropriate remorse. He had, of course, disposed of the apple and made his apology to the Recreation Director the next morning, before school.

Jonas thought again about that incident. He was still bewildered by it. Not by the announcement or the necessary apology; those were standard procedures, and he had deserved them—but by the incident itself. He probably should have brought up his feeling of bewilderment that very evening when the family unit had shared their feelings of the day. But he had not been able to sort out and put words to the source of his confusion, so he had let it pass.

It had happened during the recreation period, when he had been playing with Asher. Jonas had casually picked up an apple from the basket where the snacks were kept, and had thrown it to his friend. Asher had thrown it back, and they had begun a simple game of catch.

There had been nothing special about it; it was an activity that he had performed countless times: throw, catch; throw, catch. It was effortless for Jonas, and even boring, though Asher enjoyed it, and playing catch was a required activity for Asher because it would improve his hand-eye coordination, which was not up to standards.

But suddenly Jonas had noticed, following the path of the apple through the air with his eyes, that the piece of fruit had—well, this was the part that he couldn't adequately understand—the apple had *changed*. Just for an instant. It had changed in mid-air, he remembered. Then it was in his hand, and he looked at it carefully, but it was the same apple. Unchanged. The

same size and shape: a perfect sphere. The same nondescript shade, about the same shade as his own tunic.

There was absolutely nothing remarkable about that apple. He had tossed it back and forth between his hands a few times, then thrown it again to Asher. And again—in the air, for an instant only—it had changed.

It had happened four times. Jonas had blinked, looked around, and then tested his eyesight, squinting at the small print on the identification badge attached to his tunic. He read his name quite clearly. He could also clearly see Asher at the other end of the throwing area. And he had had no problem catching the apple.

Jonas had been completely mystified.

“Ash?” he had called. “Does anything seem strange to you? About the apple?”

“Yes,” Asher called back, laughing. “It jumps out of my hand onto the ground!” Asher had just dropped it once again.

So Jonas laughed too, and with his laughter tried to ignore his uneasy conviction that *something* had happened. But he had taken the apple home, against the recreation area rules. That evening, before his parents and Lily arrived at the dwelling, he had held it in his hands and looked at it carefully. It was slightly bruised now, because Asher had dropped it several times. But there was nothing at all unusual about the apple.

He had held a magnifying glass to it. He had tossed it several times across the room, watching, and then rolled it around and around on his desktop, waiting for the thing to happen again.

But it hadn’t. The only thing that happened was the announcement later that evening over the speaker, the announcement that had singled him out without using his name, that had caused both of his parents to glance meaningfully at his desk where the apple still lay.

Now, sitting at his desk, staring at his schoolwork as his family hovered over the newchild in its basket, he shook his head, trying to forget the odd incident. He forced himself to arrange his papers and try to study a little before the evening meal. The newchild, Gabriel, stirred and whimpered, and Father spoke softly to Lily, explaining the feeding procedure as he opened the container that held the formula and equipment.

The evening proceeded as all evenings did in the family unit, in the dwelling, in the community: quiet, reflective, a time for renewal and

preparation for the day to come. It was different only in the addition to it of the newchild with his pale, solemn, knowing eyes.