

The GIVER by Lois Lowry. For all the children To whom we entrust the future One was ALMOST December, and Jonas was beginning to be frightened. No. Wrong word, Jonas thought. Frightened meant that deep, sickening feeling of something terrible about to happen. Frightened was the way he had felt a year ago when an unidentified aircraft had flown over the community twice. He had seen it both times. Squinting toward the sky, he had seen the sleek jet, almost a blur at its high speed, go past, and a second later heard the blast of sound that followed. Then one more time, a moment later, from the opposite direction, the same plane. At first, he had been only fascinated. He had never seen aircraft so close, for it was against the rules for Pilots to fly over the community. Occasionally, when supplies were delivered by cargo planes to the landing field across the river, the children rode their bicycles to the riverbank and watched, intrigued, the unloading and then the takeoff directed to the west, always away from the community. But the aircraft a year ago had been different. It was not a squat, fat-bellied cargo plane but a needle-nosed single-pilot jet. Jonas, looking around anxiously, had seen others—adults as well as children—stop what they were doing and wait, confused, for an explanation of the frightening event. Then all of the citizens had been ordered to go into the nearest building and stay there. IMMEDIATELY, the rasping voice through the speakers had said. LEAVE YOUR BICYCLES WHERE THEY ARE. Instantly, obediently, Jonas had dropped his bike on its side on the path behind his family's dwelling. He had run indoors and stayed there, alone. His parents and his little sister, Lily, was at the Childcare Center where she spent her after-school hours. Looking through the front window, he had seen no people: none of the busy afternoon crew of Street Cleaners, Landscape Workers, and Food Delivery people who usually populated the community at that time of day. He saw only the abandoned bikes here and there on their sides; an upturned wheel on one was still revolving slowly. He had been frightened then. The sense of his own community silent, waiting, had made his stomach churn. He had shakily walked back before his error was noticed. NEEDLESS TO SAY, HE WILL BE RELEASED, the voice had said, followed by silence. There was an ironic tone to that final message, as if the Speaker found it amusing; and Jonas had smiled a little, though he knew what a grim statement it had been. For a contributing citizen to be released from the community was a final decision, a terrible punishment, an overwhelming statement of failure. Even the children were scolded if they used the term lightly at play, jeering at a teammate who missed a catch or stumbled in a race. Jonas had done it once, had shouted at his best friend, "That's it, Asher! You're released!" when Asher's clumsy error had lost a match for his team. He had been taken aside for a brief and serious talk by the coach, had hung his head with guilt and embarrassment, and apologized to Asher after the game. Now, thinking about the feeling of fear as he pedaled home along the river path, he remembered that moment of palpable, stomach-sinking terror when the aircraft had streaked above. It was not what he was feeling now with December approaching. He searched for the right word to describe his own feeling. Jonas was careful about language. Not like his friend, Asher, who talked too fast and mixed things up, scrambling words and phrases until they were barely recognizable and often very funny. Jonas grinned, remembering the morning that Asher had dashed into the classroom, late as usual, arriving breathlessly in the middle of the chanting of the morning anthem. When the class took their seats at the conclusion of the patriotic hymn, Asher remained standing to make his public apology as was required. "I apologize for inconveniencing my learning community," Asher ran through the standard apology phrase rapidly, still catching his breath. The Instructor and class waited patiently for his explanation. The students had all been grinning, because they had listened to Asher's explanations so many times before. "I left home at the correct time but when I was riding along near the hatchery, the crew was separating some salmon. I guess I just got distraught, watching them." "I apologize to my classmates," Asher concluded. He smoothed his rumpled tunic and sat down. "We accept your apology, Asher." The class recited the standard response in unison. Many of the students were biting their lips to keep from laughing. "I accept your apology, Asher," the Instructor said. He was smiling. "And I thank you, because once again you have provided an opportunity for a lesson in language. 'Distraught' is too strong an adjective to describe salmon-viewing." He turned and wrote "distraught" on the instructional board. Beside it he wrote "distracted." Jonas, nearing his home now, smiled at the recollection. Thinking, still, as he wheeled his bike into its narrow port beside the door, he realized that frightened was the wrong word to describe his feelings, now that December was almost here. It was too strong an adjective. He had waited a long time for this special December. Now that it was almost upon him, he wasn't frightened, but he was . . . eager, he decided. He was eager for it to come. And he was excited, certainly. All of the Elevens were excited about the event that would be coming soon. But there was a little shudder of nervousness when he thought about it, about what might happen. Apprehensive, Jonas decided. That's what I am. "Who wants to be the first tonight, for feelings?" Jonas's father asked, at the conclusion of their evening meal. It was one of the rituals, the evening telling of feelings. Sometimes Jonas and his sister, Lily, argued over turns, over who would get to go first. Their parents, of course, were part of the ritual; they, too, told their feelings each evening. But like all parents—all adults—they didn't fight and wheeled for their turn. Nor did Jonas, tonight. His feelings were too complicated this evening. He wanted to share them, but he wasn't eager to begin the process of sifting through his own complicated emotions, even with the help that he knew his parents could give. "You go, Lily," he said, seeing his sister, who was much younger—only a Seven—wiggling with impatience in her chair. "I felt very angry this afternoon," Lily announced. "My Childcare group was at the play area, and we had a visiting group of Sevens, and they didn't obey the rules at all. One of them—a male—I don't know his name—kept going right to the front of the line for the slide, even when the rest of us were all waiting. I felt so angry at him. I made my hand into a fist, like this." She held up a clenched fist and the rest of the family smiled at her small defiant gesture. "Why do you think the visitors didn't obey the rules?" Mother asked. Lily considered, and shook her head. "I don't know. They acted like . . . like . . ." "Animals?" Jonas suggested. He laughed. "That's right," Lily said, laughing too. "Like animals." Neither child knew what the word meant, exactly, but it was often used to describe someone uneducated or clumsy, someone who didn't fit in. "Where were the visitors from?" Father asked. Lily frowned, trying to remember. "Our leader told us, when he made the welcome speech, but I can't remember. I guess I wasn't paying attention. It was from another community. They had to leave very early, and they had to finish their midday meal on the bus." Mother nodded. "Do you think it's possible that their rules may be different? And so they simply didn't know what your play area rules were?" Lily shrugged, and nodded. "I suppose." "You've visited other communities, haven't you?" Jonas asked. "My group has, often." Lily nodded again. "When we were Sixes, we went and shared a whole school day with a group of Sixes in their community." "How did you feel when you were there?" Lily frowned. "I felt strange. Because their methods were different. They were learning about things that my group hadn't learned yet, so we felt stupid." Father was listening with interest. "I'm thinking, Lily," he said, "about the boy who didn't obey the rules today. Do you think it's possible that he felt strange and stupid, being in a new place with rules that he didn't know about?" Lily pondered that. "Yes," she said, finally. "I feel a little sorry for him," Jonas said, "even though I don't even know him. I feel sorry for anyone who is in a place where he feels strange and stupid." "How do you feel now, Lily?" Father asked. "Still angry?" "I guess not," Lily decided. "I guess I feel a little sorry for him. And sorry I made a fist." She grinned. Jonas smiled back at his sister. Lily's feelings were always straightforward, fairly simple, usually easy to resolve. He guessed that his own had been, too, when he was a Seven. He listened politely, though not very attentively, while his father took his turn, describing a feeling of worry that he'd had that day at work, a concern about one of the newchildren who wasn't doing well. Jonas's father's title was Nurturer. He and the other Nurturers were responsible for all the physical and emotional needs of every newchild during his earliest life. It was a very important job, Jonas knew, but it wasn't one that interested him much. "What gender is it?" Lily asked. "Male," Father said. "He's a sweet little male with a lovely disposition. But he isn't growing as fast as he should, and he doesn't sleep soundly. We have him in the extra care section for supplementary nurturing, but the committee's beginning to talk about releasing him." "Oh, no," Mother murmured sympathetically. "I know how sad that must make you feel." Jonas and Lily both nodded sympathetically as well. Release of newchildren was always sad, because they hadn't had a chance to enjoy life within the community yet. And they hadn't done anything wrong. There were only two occasions of release which were not punishment. Release of the elderly, which was a time of celebration for a life well and fully lived; and release of a newchild, which always brought a sense of what-could-we-have-done. This was especially troubling for the Nurturers, like Father, who felt they had failed somehow. But it happened very rarely. "Well," Father said, "I'm going to keep trying. I may ask the committee for permission to bring him here at night, if you don't mind. You know what the night-crew Nurturers are like. I think this little guy needs something extra." "Of course," Mother said, and Jonas and Lily nodded. They had heard Father complain about the night crew before. It was a lesser job, night-crew nurturing, assigned to those who lacked the interest or skills or insight for the more vital jobs of the daytime hours. Most of the people on the night crew had not even been given spouses because they lacked, somehow, the essential capacity to connect to others, which was required for the creation of a family unit. "Maybe we could even keep him," Lily suggested sweetly, trying to look innocent. The look was fake, Jonas knew; they all knew. "Lily," Mother reminded her, smiling, "you know the rules." Two children—one male, one female—to each family unit. It was written very clearly in the rules. Lily giggled. "Well," she said, "I thought maybe just this once." Next, Mother, who held a prominent position at the Department of Justice, talked about her feelings. Today a repeat offender had been brought before her, someone who had broken the rules before. Someone who she hoped had been adequately and fairly punished, and who had been restored to his place: to his job, his home, his family unit. To see him brought before her a second time caused her some overwhelming feelings of frustration and anger. And even guilt, that she hadn't made a difference in his life. "I feel frightened, too, for him," she confessed. "You know that there's no third chance. The rules say that if there's a third transgression, he simply has to be released." Jonas shivered. He knew it happened. There was even a boy in his group of Elevens whose father had been released years before. No one ever mentioned it; the disgrace was unspeakable. It was hard to imagine. Lily stood up and went to her mother. She stroked her mother's arm. "J.F. Jonas is really nothing to worry about," Jonas explained, "and that every adult has been through it. I know you have, Father, and you too, Mother. But it's the Ceremony that I'm apprehensive about. It's almost December." Lily looked up, her eyes wide. "The Ceremony of Twelve," she whispered in an awed voice. Even the smallest children—Lily's age and younger—knew that it lay in the future for each of them. "I'm glad you told us of your feelings," Father said. "Lily," Mother said, beckoning to the little girl, "Go on now and get into your nightclothes. Father and I are going to stay here and talk to Jonas for a while." Lily sighed, but obediently she got down from her chair. "Privately?" she asked. Mother nodded. "Yes," she said, "this talk will be a private one with Jonas." Two JONAS WATCHED AS his father poured a fresh cup of coffee. He was sitting at the table, and his father was sitting next to him. "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 full of excitement. 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, some 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 appointment 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 amazed 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 Gabby, actually," he said, and grinned. "Gabby," 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 he was 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 at 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 far away 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