

The Giver

Chapter 14

It was much the same, this memory, though the hill seemed to be a different one, steeper, and the snow was not falling as thickly as it had before.

It was colder, also, Jonas perceived. He could see, as he sat waiting at the top of the hill, that the snow beneath the sled was not thick and soft as it had been before, but hard, and coated with bluish ice.

The sled moved forward, and Jonas grinned with delight, looking forward to the breathtaking slide down through the invigorating air.

But the runners, this time, couldn't slice through the frozen expanse as they had on the other, snow-cushioned hill. They skittered sideways and the sled gathered speed. Jonas pulled at the rope, trying to steer, but the steepness and speed took control from his hands and he was no longer enjoying the feeling of freedom but instead, terrified, was at the mercy of the wild acceleration downward over the ice.

Sideways, spinning, the sled hit a bump in the hill and Jonas was jarred loose and thrown violently into the air. He fell with his leg twisted under him, and could hear the crack of bone. His face scraped along jagged edges of ice and when he came, at last, to a stop, he lay shocked and still, feeling nothing at first but fear.

Then, the first wave of pain. He gasped. It was as if a hatchet lay lodged in his leg, slicing through each nerve with a hot blade. In his agony he perceived the word "fire" and felt flames licking at the torn bone and flesh.

He tried to move, and could not. The pain grew.

He screamed. There was no answer.

Sobbing, he turned his head and vomited onto the frozen snow. Blood dripped from his face into the vomit.

"Nooooo!" he cried, and the sound disappeared into the empty landscape, into the wind.

Then, suddenly, he was in the Annex room again, writhing on the

bed. His face was wet with tears.

Able to move now, he rocked his own body back and forth, breathing deeply to release the remembered pain.

He sat, and looked at his own leg, where it lay straight on the bed, unbroken. The brutal slice of pain was gone. But the leg ached horribly, still, and his face felt raw.

"May I have relief-of-pain, please?" he begged. It was always provided in his everyday life for the bruises and wounds, for a mashed finger, a stomach ache, a skinned knee from a fall from a bike. There was always a daub of anesthetic ointment, or a pill; or in severe instances, an injection that brought complete and instantaneous deliverance.

But The Giver said no, and looked away.

Limping, Jonas walked home, pushing his bicycle, that evening. The sunburn pain had been so small, in comparison, and had not stayed with him. But this ache lingered.

It was not unendurable, as the pain on the hill had been. Jonas tried to be brave. He remembered that the Chief Elder had said he was brave.

"Is something wrong, Jonas?" his father asked at the evening meal. "You're so quiet tonight. Aren't you feeling well? Would you like some medication?"

But Jonas remembered the rules. No medication for anything related to his training.

And no discussion of his training. At the time for sharing-of-feelings, he simply said that he felt tired, that his school lessons had been unusually demanding that day.

He went to his sleepingroom early, and from behind the closed door he could hear his parents and sister laughing as they gave Gabriel his evening bath.

They have never known pain, he thought. The realization made him feel desperately lonely, and he rubbed his throbbing leg. He eventually slept. Again and again he dreamed of the anguish and the isolation on the forsaken hill.

The daily training continued, and now it always included pain. The agony of the fractured leg began to seem no more than a mild discomfort as The Giver led Jonas firmly, little by little, into the deep and terrible suffering of the past. Each time, in his kindness, The Giver ended the afternoon with a color-filled memory of pleasure: a brisk sail on a blue-green lake; a meadow dotted with yellow wildflowers; an orange sunset behind mountains.

It was not enough to assuage the pain that Jonas was beginning, now, to know.

"Why?" Jonas asked him after he had received a torturous memory in which he had been neglected and unfed; the hunger had caused excruciating spasms in his empty, distended stomach. He lay on the bed, aching. "Why do you and I have to hold these memories?"

"It gives us wisdom," The Giver replied. "Without wisdom I could not fulfill my function of advising the Committee of Elders when they call upon me."

"But what wisdom do you get from hunger?" Jonas groaned. His stomach still hurt, though the memory had ended.

"Some years ago," The Giver told him, "before your birth, a lot of citizens petitioned the Committee of Elders. They wanted to increase the rate of births. They wanted each Birthmother to be assigned four births instead of three, so that the population would increase and there would be more Laborers available."

Jonas nodded, listening. "That makes sense."

"The idea was that certain family units could accommodate an additional child."

Jonas nodded again. "Mine could," he pointed out. "We have Gabriel this year, and it's fun, having a third child."

"The Committee of Elders sought my advice," The Giver said. "It made sense to them, too, but it was a new idea, and they came to me for wisdom."

"And you used your memories?"

The Giver said yes. "And the strongest memory that came was hunger. It came from many generations back. *Centuries* back. The population had gotten so big that hunger was everywhere.

Excruciating hunger and starvation. It was followed by warfare."

Warfare? It was a concept Jonas did not know. But hunger was familiar to him now. Unconsciously he rubbed his own abdomen, recalling the pain of its unfulfilled needs. "So you described that to them?"

"They don't want to hear about pain. They just seek the advice. I simply advised them against increasing the population."

"But you said that that was before my birth. They hardly ever come to you for advice. Only when they--what was it you said? When they have a problem they've never faced before. When did it happen last?"

"Do you remember the day when the plane flew over the community?"

"Yes. I was scared."

"So were they. They prepared to shoot it down. But they sought my advice. I told them to wait."

"But how did you know? How did you know the pilot was lost?"

"I didn't. I used my wisdom, from the memories. I knew that there had been times in the past--terrible times--when people had destroyed others in haste, in fear, and had brought about their own destruction."

Jonas realized something. "That means," he said slowly, "that you have memories of destruction. And you have to give them to me, too, because I have to get the wisdom."

The Giver nodded.

"But it will hurt," Jonas said. It wasn't a question. "It will hurt terribly," The Giver agreed.

"But why can't *everyone* have the memories? I think it would seem a little easier if the memories were shared. You and I wouldn't have to bear so much by ourselves, if everybody took a part."

The Giver sighed. "You're right," he said. "But then everyone would be burdened and pained. They don't want that. And that's the real reason The Receiver is so vital to them, and so honored. They selected me--and you--to lift that burden from themselves."

"When did they decide that?" Jonas asked angrily. "It wasn't fair. Let's change it!"

"How do you suggest we do that? I've never been able to think of a way, and I'm supposed to be the one with all the wisdom."

"But there are two of us now," Jonas said eagerly. "*Together* we can think of something!"

The Giver watched him with a wry smile.

"Why can't we just apply for a change of rules?" Jonas suggested.

The Giver laughed; then Jonas, too, chuckled reluctantly.

"The decision was made long before my time or yours," The Giver said, "and before the previous Receiver, and--" He waited.

"Back and back and back." Jonas repeated the familiar phrase. Sometimes it had seemed humorous to him. Sometimes it had seemed meaningful and important.

Now it was ominous. It meant, he knew, that nothing could be changed.

The newchild, Gabriel, was growing, and successfully passed the tests of maturity that the Nurturers gave each month; he could sit alone, now, could reach for and grasp small play objects, and he had six teeth. During the daytime hours, Father reported, he was cheerful and seemed of normal intelligence. But he remained fretful at night, whimpering often, needing frequent attention.

"After all this extra time I've put in with him," Father said one evening after Gabriel had been bathed and was lying, for the moment, hugging his hippo placidly in the small crib that had replaced the basket, "I hope they're not going to decide to release him."

"Maybe it would be for the best," Mother suggested. "I know you don't mind getting up with him at night. But the lack of sleep is awfully hard for me."

"If they release Gabriel, can we get another newchild as a visitor?" asked Lily. She was kneeling beside the crib, making funny faces at the little one, who was smiling back at her.

Jonas's mother rolled her eyes in dismay.

"No," Father said, smiling. He ruffled Lily's hair. "It's very rare, anyway, that a newchild's status is as uncertain as Gabriel's. It probably won't happen again, for a long time.

"Anyway," he sighed, "they won't make the decision for a while. Right now we're all preparing for a release we'll probably have to make very soon. There's a Birthmother who's expecting twin males next month."

"Oh, dear," Mother said, shaking her head. "If they're identical, I hope you're not the one assigned--"

"I am. I'm next on the list. I'll have to select the one to be nurtured, and the one to be released. It's usually not hard, though. Usually it's just a matter of birthweight. We release the smaller of the two."

Jonas, listening, thought suddenly about the bridge and how, standing there, he had wondered what lay Elsewhere.

Was there someone there, waiting, who would receive the tiny released twin? Would it grow up Elsewhere, not knowing, ever, that in this community lived a being who looked exactly the same?

For a moment he felt a tiny, fluttering hope that he knew was quite foolish. He hoped that it would be Larissa, waiting. Larissa, the old woman he had helped. He remembered her sparkling eyes, her soft voice, her low chuckle. Fiona had told him recently that Larissa had been released at a wonderful ceremony.

But he knew that the Old were not given children to raise. Larissa's life Elsewhere would be quiet and serene as befit the Old; she would not welcome the responsibility of nurturing a newchild who needed feeding and care, and would likely cry at night.

"Mother? Father?" he said, the idea coming to him unexpectedly, "why don't we put Gabriel's crib in my room tonight? I know how to feed and comfort him, and it would let you and Father get some sleep."

Father looked doubtful. "You sleep so soundly, Jonas. What if his restlessness didn't wake you?"

It was Lily who answered that. "If no one goes to tend Gabriel," she pointed out, "he gets very loud. He'd wake *all* of us, if Jonas slept

through it."

Father laughed. "You're right, Lily-billy. All right, Jonas, let's try it, just for tonight. I'll take the night off and we'll let Mother get some sleep, too."

Gabriel slept soundly for the earliest part of the night. Jonas, in his bed, lay awake for a while; from time to time he raised himself on one elbow, looking over at the crib.

The newchild was on his stomach, his arms relaxed beside his head, his eyes closed, and his breathing regular and undisturbed. Finally Jonas slept too.

Then, as the middle hours of the night approached, the noise of Gabe's restlessness woke Jonas. The newchild was turning under his cover, flailing his arms, and beginning to whimper.

Jonas rose and went to him. Gently he patted Gabriel's back. Sometimes that was all it took to lull him back to sleep. But the newchild still squirmed fretfully under his hand.

Still patting rhythmically, Jonas began to remember the wonderful sail that The Giver had given him not long before: a bright, breezy day on a clear turquoise lake, and above him the white sail of the boat billowing as he moved along in the brisk wind.

He was not aware of giving the memory; but suddenly he realized that it was becoming dimmer, that it was sliding through his hand into the being of the newchild. Gabriel became quiet. Startled, Jonas pulled back what was left of the memory with a burst of will. He removed his hand from the little back and stood quietly beside the crib.

To himself, he called the memory of the sail forward again. It was still there, but the sky was less blue, the gentle motion of the boat slower, the water of the lake more murky and clouded. He kept it for a while, soothing his own nervousness at what had occurred, then let it go and returned to his bed.

Once more, toward dawn, the newchild woke and cried out. Again Jonas went to him. This time he quite deliberately placed his hand firmly on Gabriel's back, and released the rest of the calming day on the lake. Again Gabriel slept.

But now Jonas lay awake, thinking. He no longer had any more

than a wisp of the memory, and he felt a small lack where it had been. He could ask The Giver for another sail, he knew. A sail perhaps on ocean, next time, for Jonas had a memory of ocean, now, and knew what it was; he knew that there were sailboats there, too, in memories yet to be acquired.

He wondered, though, if he should confess to The Giver that he had given a memory away. He was not yet qualified to be a Giver himself; nor had Gabriel been selected to be a Receiver.

That he had this power frightened him. He decided not to tell.