

The Era by Nana Kwame Adjei-Brenyah

“Suck one and die,” says Scotty, a tall, mostly-true, kid. “I’m aggressive ’cause I think you don’t know shit.”

We’re in HowItWas class.

“Well,” Mr. Harper says, twisting his ugly body toward us, “you should shut your mouth because you’re a youth-teen who doesn’t know shit about shit, and I’m a full-middler who’s been teaching this stuff for more years than I’m proud of.”

“Understood,” says Scotty.

Then Mr. Harper went back to talking about the time before the Turn, which came after the Big Quick War, which came after the Long Big War. I was thinking about going to the nurse for some pre-lunch Good. I do bad at school because sometimes I think when I should be learning.

“So after the Big Quick,” Mr. Harper continues in his bored voice, “science and philosopher guys realized that people had been living wrong the whole time before. Sacrificing themselves, their efficiency, and their wants. This made a world of distrust and misfortune, which led to both Big Wars.”

“Back then, everyone was a liar. It was so bad that it would not have been uncommon for people to tell Samantha,” Mr. Harper points a finger at Samantha, who sits next to me, “that she was beautiful, even though, obviously, she is hideous.” Samantha nods her ugly head showing she understands. Her face is squished so bad she’s always looking in two different directions. Sometimes, kids who get pre-birth opti-selected come out all messed up. Samantha is “unoptimal.” That’s the official name for people like her, whose optimization screwed up and made their bodies horrible. I don’t have any gene corrections. I wasn’t optimized at

all. I am not optimal or ideal. But I'm also not unoptimal, so I wasn't going to look like Samantha, which is good. It's not all good though, since no opti-select means no chance of being perfect either. I don't care. I'm true. I'm proud, still. Looking over, being nosy 'cause sometimes I do that, I see Samantha log into her class pad: I would have been pretty/beautiful.

"Or," and now Mr. Harper is looking at me. I can feel him thinking me into an example. "Back then a teacher might've told Ben, who we know is a dummy, that he was smart or that if he would just apply himself, he'd do better." The class laughs 'cause they think a world where I'm smart is hee-haw. In my head, I think, Mr. Harper, do you think that back then students would think you were something other than a fat, ugly skin sack? Then I say, "Mr. Harper, do you think back then students would think you were something other than a fat, ugly skin sack?"

"I don't know what they'd say about me," Mr. Harper says. "Probably that it was a great thing that I was a teacher and that my life didn't suck. Anything else, Ben?" I start to say something else about how they must have really, really liked lying to say Mr. Harper was a good teacher, but I don't say that out loud because even though I'm being true, they'd say I was being emotional and it was clouding my truth.

"I understand," I say.

Being emotional isn't prideful, and being truthful, prideful, and intelligent are the best things. I'm truthful and prideful as best as I can be. Emotional truth-clouding was the main thing that led to the Long Big War and the Big Quick War.

Together they're called the Water Wars because of how the Federation Forces lied to its own people about the how the Amalgamation had poisoned the water reservoirs. The result was catastrophic/horrific. Then, since the people of the old Federation were mad because of their own truth-clouding, they kept on warring for years and years, and the old

Federation became the New Federation that stands proudly today. Later on, when the Amalgamation of Allies suspected a key reservoir had been poisoned, they asked the New Federation if they'd done it. In a stunning act of graciousness and honesty, my New Federation ancestors told the truth, said, "Yeah, we did poison that reservoir," and in doing so, saved many, many lives, which were later more honorably destroyed via nuclear. The wars going on now, Valid Storm Alpha and the True Freedom Campaign, are valid/true wars because we know we aren't being emotional fighting them.

"Class, please scroll to chapter forty-one and take it in," Mr. Harper says. The class touches their note-screens. The chapter is thirty-eight pages. I don't even try to read it. I look at some chapter videos of people doing things they used to do: a man throws three balls into the air, a woman in a dress spins on one leg. After three minutes the class is done reading the chapter. Their SpeedRead™ chips make reading easy/quick for them. SpeedRead™ lets optimized people take in words faster than I can hardly see them. Since I'm a clear-born, I look while they read. I read the chapters on my own later. But even staring at the videos and pictures is better than some can do. Samantha can't hardly look at her screen. And then there's Nick and Raphy who are the class shoelookers. All they do is cry and moan. They were both optimized and still became shoelookers. Being emotional is all they are and it means they aren't good for anything. I'm glad Samantha and Nick and Raphy are in the class. Because of them I'm not bottom/last in learning and I don't wanna be overall bottom/last at all.

After they've read the chapters, Mr. Harper goes back to talking about how untrue the lives people used to live were. We've all heard about the times before the Turn, but hearing Mr. Harper, who is a teacher and, hopefully, not a complete ass/idiot, talk about all the untruths people used to think were regular makes me proud to be from now and not then. Still, I mostly only half-listen 'cause I'm thinking.

When the horn goes off and it's time for rotation, I hang back so I can speak truth to Mr. Harper.

"Mr. Harper," I say.

"What, Ben?"

"Today, during a lot of your session, I was thinking about beating you to death with a rock."

"Hmm, why?"

"I don't know. I'm not a brain-healer."

"If you don't know, how would I? Go to the nurse if you want."

I walk toward the nurse's office. On the way there I see three shoelookers together in front of one of our school's war monuments: a glass case holding a wall with the nuclear shadows of our dead enemies on it. Two of the shoelookers cry and the third paces between the other two, biting his nails. Marlene is near them. Marlene is my sibling. She is five cycles older than I am and training to be a NumbersPlusTaxes teacher.

Marlene is also the reason I was not given a pre-birth opti-selection. When Marlene was opti-selected all her personality points attached to only one personality paradigm and made her a Para-one, a person who's only about one thing. There are all kinds of paradigms, like Intelligence, Conscientiousness or Extraversion. OptiLife™ releases different personality packages people can pay for all the time. My parents are successful enough to get a standard package of seven points to spread across a few paradigms. That's what they wanted for Marlene: a balanced, successful person. But all seven of the points that could have gone toward her being a bunch of different stuff all went to one paradigm. Ambition. And that much of anything makes you a freak/the worst. But some companies like Learning Inc. like people like Marlene.

She is a good worker. She is good at getting things she wants. It's all she does. Get things.

When Marlene was six and I was still a crying bag of poop, my parents had to convince her that having a younger brother would actually help her be a good teacher because she could practice information transfer on me. They also told her that I, as a clear-born, could never be in competition with her in life or their hearts, after they caught her trying to smother me with a pillow. They tell that story and laugh about it now.

After Marlene, my parents decided optimizing me wasn't worth the risk. When I was younger, she used to force me to read books for hours. She tried to make me remember things, and when I couldn't, she would slap me or pull my hair or twist my fingers. When I cheated, and she didn't notice, she would hug me and squeeze so tight I couldn't breathe. She'd kiss my forehead. When I got old enough to really be in school, and didn't do well there either, Marlene gave up on me. "No one can make a diamond out of a turd," she said.

"Got it, Marlene," I said.

"Diamonds are actually made from—"

"I don't care, Marlene."

I'm proof she isn't the perfect teacher and she hates me for it.

How I feel about Marlene: she could keel over plus die and I'd be happy plus ecstatic.

She has two cups of water in her hands. She looks at me quickly, then pours a cup of water onto the heads of each of the crying shoelookers. "Wet the Wetter" is a game people play with shoelookers sometimes. People like to trip them or pour water on the heads of criers 'cause they won't do anything back and it's humorous. The two shoelookers are

crying harder than ever now but not moving. Water drip, drips from their heads and clothes.

“Ben,” Marlene says, “isn’t it your lunch section?”

“Yes,” I say.

“This isn’t the food sector.”

“I understand.”

“I am inquiring because your ability to move effectively through an academic space reflects upon my own person,” Marlene says. I look at the empty glasses in her hands.

“I am me and you are you. I don’t care what reflects on you,” I say.

“You know this school will be mine in the future.” she says. “Even you should understand that.” Marlene always talks about how she will take the school over, how she’ll be such a good teacher that everything will be hers.

“Okay. Don’t talk to me,” I say loudly. “Para-one,” I say much more softly because she’s scary. Marlene comes close to me. The shoelookers drip. The dry one paces back and forth.

“What’d you say?” Marlene asks. I don’t say anything. I look at her eyes that always look the same, always searching for something to push over and stomp. Marlene backs off and lets me go. She walks away laughing at the wet shoelookers, and at me, I guess.

Shoelookers don’t really do anything to anybody except make them proud to be themselves and not a no-good shoelooker. People say if you tell a lot of lies, eventually you start being all depressed and weepy like them. The shoelookers don’t feel anything but sad. They feel it so much

you can see it in everything they do. They're always looking at the ground.

I walk to the nurse in big steps. Everybody gets their mandatory Good in the mornings with breakfast at school, but they have extra at the nurse's. I go to the nurse because Good makes me feel good. When I have Good it's easy to be proud and truthful and to ignore the things that cloud my truth like Marlene, or being made into an example, or knowing I'll never be perfect.

The nurse, Ms. Higgins, is shaped like an old pear. Her body type is not attractive. She isn't in a union and doesn't have any kids because she's ugly and works as a school nurse. Today her face looks tired plus more tired. I prefer Ms. Higgins. Ms. Higgins looks at me, pulls her injector from her desk. There are vials of fresh Good on a shelf behind her.

It's quiet, so I talk. "Why don't you quit if you hate it here so much?" I ask as she screws the Good into the injector gun.

"Because I need credits," she says. She steps to me. I stretch my neck out for her and close my eyes. She puts one hand on one side of my neck. Her hand is warm plus strong. She stabs the injector needle in. My head feels the way an orange tastes. I open my eyes and look at her. She waits. I look at her more. She frowns, then gives me another shot. And then I feel Good.

"Bye," I say to Ms. Higgins. She sweeps the air with her fingers, like, be gone.

On the way to my usual foodbreak table, I walk past a table of shoelookers whispering to themselves. A few are crying. Shoelookers—if they're good for anything, it's crying. I laugh 'cause the Good is going full blast and it's funny how the shoelookers just don't have a chance. How they're so down that even Good doesn't help them much.

At my table Scotty, John and some others are laughing, but I don't know why, so I feel mildly frustrated.

“Oh hey, Ben, we were so worried. Please have a seat,” says John. I sit down next to him. “How are you feeling today?” Scotty asks, and I feel even more frustrated 'cause I think they're using me for humor because I needed extra Good instead of just the mandatory breakfast Good. “We care,” Scotty says, making his voice like a bird. The table laughs. I look around, then I relax 'cause I catch on to things, and I can see that they're making fun of how things used to be, and not me.

“Why, thank you for asking,” I say. “I'm doing great.” They laugh more, and it feels great. All the laughing at the table.

“Please take my drink because you look thirsty and 'cause you're a really smart guy,” Scotty says and everybody laughs even harder. “Catch, Ben,” Scotty says as he tosses a box drink. I don't move to catch it fast enough 'cause I'm thinking: I just got Good from the nurse, and already I'm feeling things other than good, which isn't how it works.

The drink box goes over my hand and smacks Leslie McStowe right in the head.

She drops her tray and her food. Leslie frowns. I laugh with everybody else. Leslie was a twin, then her brother, Jimmy, died. Jimmy was a shoelooker who cooked his head in a food zapper. Leslie is always telling lies about how great things are or how nice everyone looks and how everybody is special. Leslie McStowe is one of the least truthful people around, which is frustrating because she and I scanned high for compatibility on our genetic compatibility charts. Probably because we're both clear-borns. Leslie's parents have protested against the Opti-Life™. They don't believe in perfect. I believe in it—I just hate it.

Leslie stands there looking lost and stupid. I want more laughs, so I stand up and make my mouth a big, huge smile and say, “Sorry about

that, Leslie, let me use my credit to get you a new lunch.” The table goes crazy. I have a lot of credits because my mother and father are successful, which I benefit from. Leslie’s face goes from Ow to all smiles as she looks at me. Then she says, “That’s so nice of you.” It’s a surprising thing to hear ’cause no one has said it to me before. The table is wild/crazy, which makes me proud. I keep it going. “C’mon, let’s get you another lunch,” I say in a voice I imagine would have been regular a long time ago.

Leslie McStowe follows me into the food part of the cafeteria. “Those people are idiots,” my mother said once. She wasn’t talking about the McStowes specifically, but a bunch of people that were giving away candy and flowers to strangers on the newscast. The McStowes and the people my mother called idiots are part of the Anti. They’re anti-Good, anti-prebirth science, anti-progress. At my school I can count the number of anti-families on my hands. But there are a lot of them in worse parts of the Federation.

“Get whatever you want,” I say, even though the guys at the table can’t hear me over here.

“Thanks so much!” Leslie says. When she smiles it looks like somebody scooped holes in her cheeks ’cause of her dimples. She grabs a juice and a greens bowl and that’s it. I register my credit code into the machine for her and she smiles at the lunch man who doesn’t say anything. “Have a great day,” I say to him because I’m still doing the thing I was doing. He stares. When we come back to the main part of the cafeteria, I’m expecting a bunch of laughs. No one at the table notices. They’re eating now. I feel frustrated.

“Thanks, Benny, you’re such a sweetie,” Leslie says. I want to let her know the whole thing was for laughs, but then I don’t, because I’m thinking. I sit down, and Leslie goes to sit with the shoelookers, though she herself is not a shoelooker. I think, maybe I should have been truthful and reminded her about the fact that her face is arranged nicely,

so she would remember we scanned as compatible and might eventually be part of a workable, functional familiar unit with me.

Everybody has their own room in our housing unit. I have a mother and a father, and there's Marlene. In my room, I do physical maintenance like push-ups and leg pushes and then I read the chapters from school until I smell food. I go downstairs where my mother and father and sibling are all at a table chewing.

"What are you looking at me for?" I ask.

"I received a message saying you've been taking extra Good," my father says.

I take a bowl from the washer and I push the button that makes the cooker front slide open. I put a spoon in. I feel the hot inside the box. I fill the bowl with meat and grains from the cooker. "Sometimes I need it. And why aren't you being truthful?" I say. "Marlene told you that." Marlene, since she's training at the school, knows stuff about me and what I do there.

"Don't accuse anyone of not being truthful," my mother says.

"I obscured the full truth because you have a tendency to respond emotionally, like some kind of neck-crane," says my father. Standing and staring at them, I dive my spoon into my bowl. I take a bite and chew. The grains and meat taste like grains and meat.

"I only pay attention because people still associate me with you," Marlene says. "Once I'm certified I won't be interested. Until then you are still a periphery reflection of my person."

Sometimes I imagine Marlene drowning in a tank of clear water.

“Okay, I’ve listened to you and now I’m frustrated,” I say.

“We are also frustrated because people still associate you with us, even though we are our own successful individuals,” my mother says.

“Not to mention the fact that your clear-birth was a mistake and you are only alive due to your mother’s irrationality brought about by maternity,” my father says. My mother looks at me, then my father, and then nods her head. “It’s true, it’s true,” she says.

I drop my food on the floor and walk away. The bowl doesn’t break. The food splats on the floor.

“Have some pride, Ben,” my father says.

“You always say the same things. It’s frustrating,” I say from the hall so they can’t see me. I squeeze my eyes shut so no water can come from them. I try to have some pride. “I know I was a mistake already, so I don’t know why you mention it so often.”

“It’s because the fact that we didn’t select genes during your pre-birth period almost certainly correlates to your being so slow and disappointing,” my father calls, “and we’re frustrated with you and tangentially ourselves as a result.”

“I know all that,” I say. I go to the bathroom. I grab the house injector from behind the mirror. I go to grab a vial of Good. There is none. I spin around like it will be in the air somewhere. Then I take a breath and close my eyes and close the mirror. I open it again slowly, hoping it will be different. It isn’t. There is an injector, but no Good. I want to scream but don’t. Instead I go to my room. I sit in the bed.

I try to sleep. All I do is sweat and feel hurt all around my body and in my head. It gets dark. By then I feel like death/poop. Deep into the night my mother comes into the room.

“You’ve been screaming,” she says.

“I don’t care if I’ve been disturbing you. I’m frustrated you hid our Good,” I say from under the covers. I hear her step to me, she rips the covers away. She is frowning in the dark. She puts a hand on my face and turns it. Then she uses the injector in her hand and stabs it into my neck. She gives me three shots and the Good makes my teeth rattle. My mother’s hand sits on my head for a while. Then she turns and leaves. And then everything feels so right and so fine that I fall asleep smiling.

At school I get my usual morning Good. And in HowItWas class we talk about before, again.

“So even though people said all these things and acted like everyone else was important there were still wars and hurting, which proves it was a time of lies,” Mr. Harper says.

“But yesterday you said some frog crap about how some things were better and how it was easier in the old days,” Scotty says.

“This is why you’ll be a mid-level tasker at best,” Mr. Harper says. “I said some people still believe that the old way was better. Some people still live the old way because they prefer it.”

“I think those people are assjerks,” Scotty says.

“No one cares what you think,” Mr. Harper says, “though I agree with you.”

“H-How dow know?” says Samantha, in her broken, deep voice. She is normally quiet. “Mahbe okay.”

“Shut up, screw-face,” Scotty says. He takes off his shoe and throws it at Samantha. It hits her and makes a thunk sound and then bounces off her

head onto my desk. The class laughs. Mr. Harper laughs. Samantha tries to laugh. I stare at the shoe.

“See, here we have a teachable moment,” Mr. Harper says. “Back before the turn, Scotty might not have been honest about how he expressed himself, and Samantha would go on thinking he thought what she said was smart.”

I go straight to Ms. Higgins after class. When I get there she looks at me like I’m broken.

“You’ve been put on a Good restriction by your legal guardians,” she says. I can see the vials behind her. I can almost feel them. Almost, but definitely not.

“I only need two,” I say. “Even one shot, please.”

“A formal restriction has—”

“I know,” I yell. I turn around and leave.

The floors of the school are tan and white. I walk to lunch. It is hard to keep my head up ’cause I don’t feel proud or Good at all.

When I get to the cafeteria I hear someone say, “Happy birthday.” When I look up I see Leslie McStowe looking at me. She’s sitting at a table with a bunch of sorry shoelookers. Then she stands and wraps her arms around me. “Happy birthday,” she says again. I used to hide in my room and try to remember everything from whatever Marlene had given me to read so that I could get a hug like that after her tests. But this is the first one I’ve had in many cycles. I’m standing there thinking of how Leslie McStowe is strong plus soft. I can feel her breathing on my neck a little.

“It’s your birthday,” Leslie says. She is smiling at me. Her eyes seem excited/electronic.

“Oh,” I say. I have seen fifteen cycles now.

“We scanned compatible, you know. It’s in your charts,” she says quickly, answering the question I was thinking.

“Oh.”

“If you want, my parents would love to have you over to celebrate,” she looks down at the floor, not like a shoelooker, but like she’s ashamed.

“They like celebrating things.”

“I don’t celebrate like that, or associate with you. Also, everyone thinks your parents are strange,” I say.

“I know, but it would make us all really happy,” she says. This, I realize, is exactly, what Mr. Harper was speaking of. Leslie McStowe wants me to make her happy, for no reason. I look at her and am lost in something that doesn’t feel like pride or intellect or what truth should feel like.

“Please,” she says and hands me a paper that is an invitation for later in the day. I take the invitation and then I walk to the table where I normally sit with the people I usually associate with.

At home my familiar unit says things to me:

“Hello,” my father says.

“You seem agitated,” my mother says.

“You are now on the Good restriction list,” Marlene says.

I don’t say anything to anyone. Without any Good in me everything looks like a different kind of bad. And all I can imagine are the worst things about everyone and everything. And I can’t tell if my stomach is aching or whether I’m imagining how bad a really bad stomachache might be if I had one right then. Either way it hurts. Ideas that scare me run around

my head. I go to the bathroom. I pull the mirror back. There is an injector, but there is still no Good. None. Only a shaver and fluoride paste and a small medical kit. I look in the medical kit, just in case. No Good. I take the empty injector and bring it to my neck. I hit the trigger and stab and hope maybe I'll get something. I hit the trigger again. Again. I close the mirror, and a small crack appears in a corner of the glass. I go outside. I'm afraid of how bad I feel. No one asks where I am going.

The McStowes live in a complex on the outer part of the section. In our section the poor people all live on the outer parts so those of us on the inner parts don't have to come in contact with them all the time. They live cramped together in small spaces that are cheaper and as a result not as nice, in looks or housing capabilities: keeping warm/dry, being absent of animals, etc.

I haven't had any Good since breakfast. I can feel the no-Good pressing on me. Pulling me down. It is getting dark outside. Out at the edge of the section, there are so many shoelookers slowly moving through the walk-streets. They've been abandoned by the people who used to be their families. That's what happens to most shoelookers. There are a bunch of soon-deads and there are a few kid-youths and also every other age there is. Once in a while, one of the shoelookers will snap their heads up and their eyes will be wild like they just remembered something important. Then, after a few seconds of wild looking and head turning, they'll drop their heads back down.

It's worse than frustrating. Being around all those downed heads makes me want to close my eyes forever. I follow the gridwalks toward where the McStowes live. I focus on the ground because it doesn't make me want to disappear as much. The ground on the way there is grey and grey and grey. My shoes are black and grey. Good in its vial is clean/clear.

Long fingernails bite my shoulders. I look up and see a shoelooker my mother's age. Her hand are near my neck. She screams, "Where are we going?" and shakes me like she's trying to get me to wake up. Her voice is screechy like she's been yelling for a long time. I shove her, then I run because I'm very disturbed.

I make sure I'm looking up as I run. I'm sweaty when I reach Leslie's housing complex. Inside it is not nice. A bunch of cats and a raccoon race and fight in the lobby area. The walls are dirty and the paint is peeling. I walk up a stairwell that smells like a toilet. When I find the McStowe door I knock on it. I can hear people rustling inside. I imagine myself falling into a jar of needles over and over again. I haven't had any Good. The door opens. It's bright inside.

"Happy birthday" comes out of several mouths. The voices together make my heart beat harder.

"Hello," I say.

"Come in, come in," says Leslie. There's a tall man with a skinny neck and grey hair. He wears an ugly shirt with bright flowers on it.

"Great to see you, really great to see you," Father McStowe says. I'm wondering if in the McStowe's home people say everything twice.

The food sector is a small space to the left. It smells like something good. In the main sector are Leslie McStowe, her mother, her father, and three fidgeting shoelookers about my age. They have the usual sad/dirty look. They might be from the school. I don't know. I don't look at shoelookers.

"Come in," Mother McStowe says, even though I'm already inside. She is a thin woman with a short haircut. There are folds of loose skin under her neck. I come in further. Everyone is looking at me.

"How was your walk over?" Leslie says. Her face is smiling.

“Bad,” I say. “This part of the section is worse than where my unit lives.”

“Well, I’m sorry to hear that,” Father McStowe says. “Let’s have some cake now that the man of the hour is here in one piece!” Man of the hour. He is talking about me.

There are two beds in the main section. There are sheets and plates on one bed so it can be a table. There are pillows arranged on the other to make it a place to sit.

“I’ve never had cake,” I say. I haven’t. It isn’t something proud people eat. It makes people fat, my mother says, just like the candy the Antis hand out in the streets.

“Well, isn’t that a shame,” Mother McStowe says, even though she is smiling. She has dimples like her daughter. “In this house we eat cake every chance we get, seems like,” she laughs. And so does Father McStowe. Leslie laughs. Even one of the three shoelookers laughs a little. I can tell by how the shoelooker’s shoulders jump while she stares at the floor.

“You shouldn’t feel sorry for me,” I say. “My housing unit is much nicer than this.” It gets quiet, then the house starts laughing some more. Even though I don’t know exactly why they are laughing, I’m not too frustrated.

“This one!” says Father McStowe. “A true comedian.”

“What’s a true comedian?” I ask.

“Joke-tellers, humor-makers,” says Father McStowe. “Back in the old world, it was a life profession to make laughter. One of many interesting old-world lives.”

“I don’t believe that,” I say, ’cause I don’t.

“That’s okay,” says Mother McStowe, still giggling. “Let’s eat some cake.”

“Sounds sweet to me,” says Father McStowe. He laughs and so does his family.

We move over to the table/bed. The main sector of the housing unit has walls covered in sheets of paper with too many colors on them.

“Cake,” Mother McStowe says as she walks to the food sector, “was a delicacy in the old world, used to celebrate events like union-making, the lunar cycle, battle-victory and, of course, birthdays.” Mother McStowe looks for some utensil in the food sector. I look at Father McStowe and ask, “Is that the food sector your son killed himself in?” There’s a clang/clack sound from Mother McStowe dropping something on the floor.

Father McStowe looks at me. He touches my shoulder. His hand is large/heavy. “You know something,” he speaks low so only I can hear him, “one of the things we like to do in this home is be careful of what we say. What you said didn’t have to be said. And now you’ve hurt my wife. She’ll be fine, but—”

“Lying for others is what caused the Big Quick and the Long Big,” I say.

“Maybe. Or maybe it was something else. I’m talking about thinking about the other person, ya know?” Father McStowe whispers to me. “I’m sure you have a lot of ideas about this, but it’s something we try around here.” He smiles and touches my shoulder again. “Let’s eat some cake,” he says in a big voice, a voice for everybody.

I haven’t had any Good since breakfast. And here I am. In Leslie McStowe’s house. Because she invited me and because she makes me think of things that aren’t Marlene or optimization or being forever dumb/slow.

Mother McStowe comes back. She smiles at me as she hands me a knife big enough to cut a bunch of things. “It was tradition for birthday boys to cut the cake after the singing of the traditional birthday hymn,” Mother McStowe says. She looks around quickly with wide eyes, then begins to sing. The rest of her family joins in. The shoelookers look down and up, and down and up, trying to decide what to be, and even they mumble along with the McStowes.

Happy birthday to ya, happy birthday to ya
Happy birthday, happy birthday to ya
Happy birthday, it’s your day yeah
Happy birthday to ya, happy birthday yeah!

When they finish, Mother McStowe tells me, with her eyes, to cut the cake. The knife cuts through easily. “I forgot, traditionally, you are supposed to make a wish before you cut into the cake,” says Mother McStowe. “But after is fine, I suppose. You can wish for anything.”

Of course, I wish for Good. I put one more cut into the cake, then Mother McStowe takes the knife for me, and I see she cuts into the middle of it instead of off the side like I did. She cuts pieces for everybody. Father McStowe and Leslie and I sit on the bed made for sitting. The rest stand and chew. The cake is the sweetest thing I’ve ever eaten. “Do you like it?”

“It’s good ’cause it’s so sweet,” I say. It makes my tongue and teeth feel more alive.

“And it’s an authentic old-time recipe you can’t get anywhere else,” Mother McStowe says.

When half my cake is gone I turn to Father McStowe. “Do you have any extra Good?” I ask somewhat discretely, since taking too much Good is not a proud thing. Father McStowe looks at me with cheeks full of cake.

“We like to think of our home as a throwback to an era before industrial Good,” he says. He swallows, then puts a hand on my shoulder then removes it.

“I need Good.”

“You’re thinking now, this,” Father McStowe does something with his hands, “is then. Think of our home as a place where no one needs industrial Good.”

“Is it because you’re poor that you don’t have any Good?” I ask. Father McStowe laughs so hard he spits wet cake onto the floor. Quickly, Mother McStowe cleans it up. He looks to his daughter and says, “This one is funny. A real comedian.”

“I’m not telling jokes,” I say.

“That’s why you’re so good,” Father McStowe says. “When I want to be funny, I usually tell an old-time joke, like this one,” he clears his throat. “Have you heard the one about the deaf man?”

“What?”

“That’s what he said!” Father McStowe says. “If you would have said ‘no’ I would have said ‘neither has he.’ Get it?” He touches me on the shoulder and chuckles. Leslie and the shoelookers giggle with him.

“Truly, we like to think we, as you’ve seen, have created a space that is really a throwback to a time before the Big Quick or even the Long Big. My family and I recreate that decent era for people who might want, or need it.”

“I’m frustrated because you don’t have any Good. I’m leaving,” I say.

“What we—hey Linda, could you grab some of our literature—offer here is a way to feel and be happy without Good. We can feel good just by being together and you can join us a few times a week depending on the

package that works for you.” Leslie is smiling and the shoelookers are eating cake, switching between weak smiles and lost frowns.

“I’m going home,” I say.

“Take some literature,” he says. With her face smiling, Mother McStowe hands me a pamphlet. On it are smiling faces and words and different prices. Different amounts of time are trailed by different credit values on each row of information.

“There are lots of choices,” Leslie says.

“Think it over. If any package feels right for you, let Leslie know. We recommend starting off with at least three days a week here with us in The Era. You’ll feel brand-new. Just look at these guests,” Mother McStowe points to the shoelookers who are munching cake still. They look at me and they all try to smile.

I get up. “I’m frustrated because I thought this was something different,” I yell. I haven’t had any Good. I feel the pamphlet crushing in my fist. On the front it says Life in the Era in curly letters. “Also your daughter doesn’t frustrate me, so that’s why I came.”

“Look over the literature,” Father McStowe says when I’m at the door.

“I haven’t had any Good since the morning, that’s why I’m emotional,” I scream before I slam the door and run back to my own housing unit. I get tired, so I have to walk. Plus there is no Good at my housing unit anyways. The night is black. The gridwalk is grey and grey and grey. There’s some sweet left on my teeth and, even after the sweet is gone, thinking about it helps keep me walking.

At breakfast the next day the Good makes me feel better for a few minutes, but not even through to the last sip of my milk. My neck aches.

My brain throbs. The floor of the school is mostly tan and the patterns against the tan are at least easy to drown in. In Mr. Harper's class we are talking about the Long Big and how it led to the Big Quick, like always. I think of cake during class.

At lunch I go to sit with my usuals. At the table Scotty says, "Back off, we don't want to associate with a shoelooker like you." Somebody else says, "Go sit with the downs over there." I just stand there, looking at the ground, because I'm not a shoelooker, even though, with my head down, and the feeling in my head, and the tears almost in my eyes, I probably look like one.

I try to be proud and look up. I feel a boom and a hurt under my eye. I fall. The table laughs. I see that John has punched me to say I am officially not welcome. My face hurts. I want to lie there, but I get up because I'm pulled up. It is Leslie McStowe that pulls me. She is frowning. When I'm standing, I pick my head up and she walks with me to the nurse's office. "It's okay," Leslie says, lying like they used to, like she does. And I am happy to hear her do it.

In the nurse's office Ms. Higgins stares at the two of us. Samantha is sitting in a chair. Samantha is not healthy, ever, but she looks at me like, welcome, and does her happier moaning sound. Ms. Higgins pulls a cold pack out of a cold box. I put the cold over my eye. It makes the hurt less. I sit in a chair next to Samantha. Leslie sits in one next to me.

"He got hit," Leslie says.

"Yah ohkay?" Samantha groans.

"You got hit," Ms. Higgins says.

"Yes," I say. Ms. Higgins says nothing. Then she stands up and opens the drawer that holds her injector. Hearing the drawer slide open makes my skin tingle. She turns her back to us so she can feed some fresh new Good into the injector.

Then, at the office door, I see my sibling. “I heard,” says Marlene, “you’ve become a real shoelooker.” Leslie touches my not-cold hand. Her fingers are warm on mine. “Ben is on a Good restriction, Higgins.” With one eye I look at Leslie McStowe, then Samantha, and then Marlene, and then Ms. Higgins. Ms. Higgins screws a vial of Good into the injector. “I’ll report you,” Marlene says.

Ms. Higgins continues screwing the vial into the injector and does not look at Marlene. Marlene stands at the office door. She’s holding a cup of water. All I want is Good. Ms. Higgins looks at me with her loaded injector. Leslie squeezes my hand. I look at Ms. Higgins. I shake my head. Ms. Higgins drops her injector on her desk then sits down in her chair. She turns her head and looks at the wall. We are quiet. It’s quiet for a long time. Leslie looks at me. She wants to smile, but she can’t, so with my head down, one hand warm, one hand cold, one eye bruising and the other looking at her I say, “Have you heard the one about the deaf man?”