



Part I:  
**AWAKE**

*Each day is a little life:  
every waking and rising a little birth,  
every fresh morning a little youth,  
every going to rest and sleep a little death.*

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—Arthur Schopenhauer  
*The Essays of Arthur Schopenhauer; Counsels and Maxims*

**ADVANCE READING COPY**

# Snapshots

ADVANCE READING COPY

I remember.

That's what they want me to say, this Woman sitting beside my bed, this Man by the window. But I won't, because it would be a lie.

The Woman places a stack of photos on my bedside table, then slowly slides the top one toward me. Her eyes dart from me to the Man. He leans against the wall by the window, staring at the tree branches outside.

"Honey," she calls to him, her voice tight. He looks at us over his shoulder with tired eyes, then shuffles closer. It feels like the room, the entire building maybe, sucks in its breath when I pick up the photo and study it carefully, slowly, as if my life depended on it. Because it kind of does.

A family stands on the beach. The Woman, petite with wavy black hair, has her arms around the Girl's shoulders. The Girl's sunburned face is lit up by a grin. The Boy, wearing an oversized pirate hat, sits on the Man's shoulders.

They are all wearing colorful beachwear. The Man is stocky, with a buzz cut, and has socks on with his sandals. There are palm trees and ocean waves behind the family. Obviously, it's a vacation shot, taken somewhere far from here. How do I know?

Some things—the big stuff—I am sure of. Like, I do not live in a tropical place, and the Earth goes around the sun. It's the not-so-minor details that leave me guessing, like what my favorite flavor of ice cream is, why my head hurts and who I am exactly.

Nine days have gone by, they say, since I awoke from the Big Sleep. *The coma*. I stare at the photo, the expectation so thick in the air that I can almost taste it. This Woman and this Man want my eyes to open wide and a loud *click* to go off somewhere in my brain. For me to say, “Oh yes, of course, how could I forget that amazing day?”

But it doesn't happen.

I do know that the Girl on the beach, with the naïve I've-got-my-whole-life-ahead-of-me grin, is the same Girl who gazes back at me from the bathroom mirror. But I could be looking at a photo of some random generic, happy family in a resort brochure, because I feel only a cool emptiness when I gaze down at them.

I slide the photo back across the table, look up at the Woman and shrug. She nods her head and says softly, “Okay, okay,” but her eyes glisten with disappointment.

This Woman, you see, is my mother. This Man is my father. The Boy in the photo is my ten-year-old

brother, Stephen. My name is Jessica, and I am fifteen years old. And thanks to a bison bull named Ramses on their—*our*—ranch, my brain is mush. One Very Bad Day, April 26, to be exact, Ramses charged me, putting me in the coma. Eleven days *in* the coma plus nine days *out* equals twenty days in the hospital so far. I can walk and talk and eat and don't need sponge baths anymore.

But my old life is a long blank that my brain no longer fills in for me.

I know all of this because they explained it to me, slowly and gently, with concern in their eyes. Intellectually, I can understand. Inside, though, where it really counts, I can't feel any of it. When she—the Woman, my mother—reaches toward me and wraps her arms around me, it's like I am being hugged by a complete stranger waiting in front of me at the grocery-store checkout. Not an ounce of warmth or love flows through me. Not even sadness.

The Woman releases me from her grip, then picks up the photos with shaking hands. She doesn't want me to see her face, I think, because she walks over to a bulletin board on the wall near the window and carefully starts putting the photos up, one by one, with push pins.

The Man steps closer and puts his hand on my shoulder. I flinch. "Well," he says, "maybe next time."

I watch the Woman as the Man paces around the room, glancing out the window every now and then. I am a lump, sitting there. Feeling nothing and saying nothing.

I may finally be awake, but I am hollow.

When I am alone and the hallway outside my door is quiet, I step slowly, carefully, into the bathroom. My hands fumble in the darkness until they find the switch. The fluorescent lighting hums, and the Girl is in front of me. The Girl in the Mirror.

“Jessica,” I whisper.

Her brow is slightly furrowed, and her gray-blue eyes stare coldly back at me. She’s a serious girl, it seems. Her face is pale, but maybe that’s from being cooped up in a hospital for weeks. A few freckles are scattered across her cheeks, and there are faint patches of purple and green, leftover bruises from her Very Bad Day. Her hair is mousy brown and medium length, mostly, except for a patch above her right ear that has been shaved. I run my hands back and forth over the stubble until my fingertips find the small circular dent. This, I’ve been told, is where a tube was inserted through my skull. I lower my hands to the edge of the sink and lean closer.

The Girl’s mouth opens, stretching wide until I can see a lumpy, off-white filling in one of her back teeth. My face muscles begin to ache, so I close my mouth and force a grin. What made the Girl smile? Did the corners of her lips curl up easily and quickly at the slightest joke or a greeting from a passing stranger? Or maybe her smile was reserved for those she loved, those who had earned her trust.

The smirk slips away and I close my eyes, then slowly reopen them. Her pupils shrink, then expand, but the eyes reveal little emotion. A thought slides into my mind: the eyes are the windows to the soul. I get as close to her as I can, until my breath leaves vapor on the glass, and I peer harder into those eyes. I see the dark outer edge, the blue flecks, thin red veins on the whites of her eyes. The soul, however, is nowhere to be found.

I move on to her forehead. Fairly high, and a small widow's peak in her hairline. Turning sideways, I inspect an ear—small, with two piercings—and then lean back to take in the overall shape of her skull. The house of the brain. I lift my hand slowly and tap on the side of her head with my knuckles.

“Hello,” I say. “Anyone home?”

The Girl in the Mirror gazes back at me, her expression vacant. I know someone is in there, hiding in the darkest corners of that mind. She was a real person once, before her slate was wiped clean. I knock again, this time hard enough that a slight ache throbs in my temple.

“I said, anyone home?”

She doesn't flinch. A wave of irritation washes over me, and my fist becomes tighter, until my fingernails cut sharply into my palm. I knock again on my temple, and again...until the fist flies out in front of me before I can stop it or think about how stupid I am being.

*Crack.* The sound of bone against glass. Pain shoots down into my hand, then to my wrist. I step back. The Girl in the Mirror has raised eyebrows, an open mouth. She is obviously shocked.

At least I know she's paying attention.

# It's a Bird, It's a Plane...

ADVANCE READING COPY

I have hardly slept, but it must be morning because a woman comes in with a cart and gives me a tray.

“Good morning, sunshine,” she says. When she’s gone I open the lid and inspect the pancakes. They are limp and the color of cardboard. I am deciding whether I can force myself to take a bite when I hear someone clear his throat.

A short man with black hair and a salt-and-pepper beard stands in the doorway. His hands are in the pockets of his khaki pants, like he’s going for a stroll in the park. The sure way he walks and the confidence in his smile both scream “doctor,” but not in an arrogant way. I surprise myself by knowing his name: Dr. Lavoie. And I remember what the Man and Woman told me: this man saved my life. He is a hero, my very own Super Doc.

“Hi, Jessica,” he says. “Your parents are meeting me here in a bit, but I was in the neighborhood and thought I’d pop by early. Okay if I interrupt your breakfast?”

I nod, replacing the lid on the pancakes. “I would be forever grateful,” I say. He smiles and steps into my room, pausing to look at the photos on the bulletin board: the beach vacation, the Girl holding a newborn baby boy, the Girl wearing a giant cowboy hat. There are also cards signed *Get Well Soon* and *Lots of Love xoxoxo*. Super Doc stands with his hands on his hips, moving his head slowly from side to side as he works his way down the rows of photos.

“Hmm,” he says. “Hmm.”

Warmth rises into my face. He has probably poked and prodded me all over, this doctor. But his looking at the pictures feels more intimate somehow.

“I was a happy camper, wasn’t I?” I say, wanting more than anything for him to stop *hmming* and staring. He turns and gives me a gentle, even smile.

“I especially like the one with the cowboy hat.” He waits to see what I will say. Maybe he hopes he will catch me off guard, that I will reveal some hint of a memory or some preference for another picture. I laugh too loudly instead.

“I guess I had bad taste too.”

“You have something against Western wear?” He winks as he pulls a pen out of the front pocket of his blue-striped shirt.

“I’m not sure,” I answer.

He nods and sits down on the chair next to my bed. “I thought it was time we had a little chat.”

I suddenly feel stupid that I'm wearing Hello Kitty pajamas. He's waiting for me to give him the thumbs up, I guess, so I say, "All right."

"You seem to be doing well."

Well? If that's another way of saying screwed in the head, maybe. I meet his gaze and am trying to think of the best way to correct him when the Woman bursts into the room. Her hair is messy, but she pats it down.

"Sorry," she says. "Ray had a bit of trouble with the tractor this morning, but he got it going and here we are." I don't see any "we," only her, but the Man must be close behind.

Super Doc laughs politely and stands to shake her hand.

"Glad you made it." He gestures to the chair, and she sits down as the Man strolls in.

Friendly handshakes between the men, and we settle down to business. I sit on the bed and we talk about my Brain. The Accident. My Life.

Super Doc is amazingly positive and has nothing but good things to say. I am strong, he says, and young, and that has allowed my brain to heal quickly. Although my walking is a bit shaky at the moment, it won't be long before it is back to normal. "It's amazing, Jessica, how far you've come in the past three weeks. The human brain's ability to recover from trauma never ceases to astound me."

"Uh, thanks," I say.

The Woman's eyes are shiny and proud, like I've won a spelling bee.

The Man's face, however, is solemn. He leans forward. "So," he says, "when is she going to start remembering things?"

Super Doc doesn't miss a beat. "That was what I wanted to talk about next."

The joy on the Woman's face fades. Super Doc turns to me then, and his brown eyes are warm and kind. "Everything I've said is true. You are bouncing back remarkably well, Jessica. Most people with this kind of injury eventually recover the majority of their memories. But I can't lie. There's no real way of knowing yet, and no guarantees."

I keep my eyes down, studying my hands, and though I probably should be upset or worried, I feel strangely numb. My post-traumatic brain struggles to absorb what he has said. Most people get their memories back. Not all. And, of course, Super Doc wouldn't lie. I want to ask him if having no feelings is usual too, but that would only add to the Man's and Woman's stress.

"For now, Jessica should continue with her rehabilitation," Super Doc says. "We'll do another CT scan soon and take it from there. Feel free to ask me questions anytime."

Suddenly they are all standing up and exchanging handshakes. "Thank you," the Woman says. Her face is as white as my bedsheet.

Super Doc reaches over and gives my knee a squeeze, then heads toward the door. I nearly grab his arm, beg him to stay and save me again, get me out of this mess for good. But I am a wimp and watch him go.

“Oh, Jess,” the Man says softly, his arm going around my shoulder. “It’s going to be okay.”

My mouth answers without my brain’s permission. “And how do you know?”

I’m not sure whether the flash in his eyes is hurt or just plain worry, but either way, I disgust myself.

# Mirage

ADVANCE READING COPY

I'm putting the lid over the untouched shepherd's pie the hospital calls dinner when the Woman walks in. A kid with reddish hair and blue-framed glasses trails in behind her. It's the Boy, my brother from the photos. He carries a bright-red gift bag with orange tissue paper flaring out of the top like it's caught fire.

"Stephen missed school this afternoon to come see you," the Woman—Mother, I remind myself—says. "He couldn't wait to give you an extra-special gift." The Boy peers at me over the top of his glasses.

My brain surprises me with what must be the kid's nickname—Little Man—but I don't know if Jessica was the only one to call him that. I'm also surprised by my urge to reach over and tousle his hair. He looks skittish, though, and I don't want to scare him.

Mother glances at the door. “Jessie, is it all right if I leave the two of you alone for a few minutes? I need to go fill out a form.”

“Does he bite?” I ask, and the Boy’s mouth curls up a bit in the corners. Mother looks at him worriedly, but he gives her a nod, and she heads out the door. The Boy and I are quiet for a moment, looking at each other.

“Hi, Little Man.” I say.

He lets out a sigh and pushes his glasses up the bridge of his nose. “This is good. I’m happy you’re awake. I was”—his voice cracks—“I was scared I might never talk to you again.” His hunched shoulders make him appear small and fragile, like if I sneeze too hard the breeze might knock him over.

“Well,” I say, “here I am.”

He looks me over carefully, as though he’s having a hard time believing I’m really sitting there talking to him.

“I wish,” he says, so softly it’s almost a whisper, “I wish this hadn’t happened. I wish—”

“Don’t worry about me,” I interrupt. “I’m as good as new. Even got a cool haircut.”

The intensity in his gray-blue eyes, the same color and shape as the Girl’s, is startling. As we look at each other, the room so quiet I can hear my own breathing, the weight of everything that’s been happening to me—the medical tests and jargon, rehab, the Man and Woman with all their photos—presses down on me suddenly.

The air feels hot and stuffy, and I can't take it—one more heavy moment and I will come undone. I let out a long breath.

“Do you think,” I say slowly, unsure of the right words to convince a ten-year-old, “we can pretend none of that ever happened? Maybe agree not to talk about it? You know, just hang out?”

The Boy bites his bottom lip, his hands clenched tightly on the handle of the gift bag. He's struggling to keep his composure—it shows on his face—but I'm not in any state to guess what's going through his mind.

“And can I have my gift already?” I say.

It takes a few seconds, but then the tiniest sliver of a smile grows, until his face is lit up in a huge grin. He looks as relieved as I feel. “It's a deal,” he says, handing me the gift bag.

I reach into the tissue paper, and my fingers find something strangely lumpy. I pull it out and turn it over in my hands. It's a kind of rock, the color of caramel, only it has these ridges all around it, like a flower burst into bloom.

“Do you like it?” Stephen says.

I nod. I have no idea what it is, but maybe I'm supposed to.

He sits beside me on the bed. “It's a sand rose. All the way from the Sahara desert. I didn't go there to get it, of course.” He grins. “I bought it in a rock shop.”

“It's nice,” I say.

He glances at me to check if I understand the meaning of his gift. When he sees that I don't, he doesn't seem disappointed though.

"Sometimes," he explains, "we go on adventures. One of our favorites is the Sahara caravan. We ride pretend camels and eat our lunch in blanket tents that we make in the living room. We even have a real dried-up scorpion."

An image flashes in my mind of a room transformed into a massive, colorful tent. I can't tell if it's a real memory or only my imagination, but I feel a tingle down my spine.

He points at the rock. "It's a kind of crystal that forms in the desert, from the evaporation of a salt basin or erosion from the wind. It's supposed to bring good luck."

I run my fingers over the ridges that form the petals. That a clump of tiny sand and salt granules could come together and form something so beautiful, so complex, amazes me. I put it on my bedside table.

"Thanks," I say. "It's cool."

We share a silence.

"This is great," he says. "That you're getting back to normal."

A jolt goes through me. Normal? If this is normal, I'm doomed. "You really think so?"

He shoots a look at the door, realizing he's said something he shouldn't have. "You don't remember the last time I was here to see you?"

The question irritates me, but he's only a kid, so I let it go. "I have issues with that, apparently."

He looks at me intently for a few seconds, then sucks in his breath. "I was here with Mom and Dad the night you came out of the coma. But you were"—he pauses, chewing his bottom lip—"nuts. You acted like you were drunk or something. You could barely walk, and you didn't make any sense when you talked. You even punched Mom."

I actually hit the Woman? You'd think I'd remember something like that. Strangely, though, that's not the part that bothers me. It dawns on me that everyone knows more about me than I do.

"Did I hit her hard?"

Stephen shakes his head, his hair falling forward. "Nah. No offense, but it was kind of a girly punch. Dad jumped in and stopped you. The nurses did have to tie you to the bed after though. And Mom and Dad didn't let me come back and see you until today."

Tie me to the bed? Like some kind of raving lunatic? I'm nauseated all of a sudden, and I stand up, gripping the bed railing.

"I have to go to the bathroom," I say, but it's too late. The vomit rises in my throat, and all I can do when it comes gushing out is open my hand and try to catch it.

Stephen leaps from the bed, eyes wide, and clutches at the box of Kleenex on my nightstand. The box tumbles

to the floor, and he scrambles to pull out a handful of tissues. When he hands them to me, he can't look me in the eye.

"Man, Jess," he says, "that's gross!"

I laugh, my nose making a snorting noise that makes me laugh again. "Yeah," I answer, "it is."

He laughs too, but there's a nervous edge to it. My sister, he must be thinking, is completely hopeless.

Mother walks in and calls for someone to deal with my mess while I wash up in the bathroom. Once Mother and Little Man are gone, I stretch out on the bed and pull the covers over my head. I close my eyes, and the golden sands of the Sahara stretch out before me in every direction. The orange ball of a sun hovers over the horizon, and sand dunes cast rippled shadows. Stephen appears by my side, and when he turns toward me he gives me a long, slow wink.