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opening extract from

Heroes

written by

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published by

Penguin Books Ltd

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My name is Francis Joseph Cassavant and I have just returned to Frenchtown in Monument and the war is over and I have no face.

Oh, I have eyes because I can see and ear-drums because I can hear but no ears to speak of, just bits of dangling flesh. But that's fine, like Dr Abrams says, because it's sight and hearing that count and I was not handsome to begin with. He was joking, of course. He was always trying to make me laugh.

If anything bothers me, it's my nose. Or, rather, the absence of my nose. My nostrils are like two small caves and they sometimes get blocked and I have to breathe through my mouth. This dries up my throat and makes it hard for me to swallow. I also become hoarse and cough a lot. My teeth are gone but my jaw is intact and my gums are firm so it's possible for me to wear dentures. In the past few weeks, my gums began to shrink, however, and the dentures have become loose and they click when I talk and slip around inside my mouth.

I have no eyebrows, but eyebrows are minor, really. I do have cheeks. Sort of. I mean, the skin that forms my cheeks was grafted from my thighs and has taken a long time to heal. My thighs sting when my pants rub against them. Dr Abrams says that all my skin will heal in time and my cheeks will

some day be as smooth as a baby's arse. That's the way he pronounced it: arse. In the meantime, he said, don't expect anybody to select you for a dance when it's Girls' Choice at the Canteen.

Don't take him wrong, please.

He has a great sense of humour and has been trying to get me to develop one.

I have been trying to do just that.

But not having much success.

I wear a scarf that covers the lower part of my face. The scarf is white and silk like the aviators wore in their airplanes back during the First World War, over the battlefields and trenches of Europe. I like to think that it flows behind me in the wind when I walk but I guess it doesn't.

There's a Red Sox cap on my head and I tilt the cap forwards so that the visor keeps the upper part of my face in shadow. I walk with my head down as if I have lost money on the sidewalk and am looking for it.

I keep a bandage on the space where my nose used to be. The bandage reaches the back of my head and is kept in place with a safety pin.

There are problems, of course.

My nose, or I should say, my caves, runs a lot. I don't know why this should happen and even the doctors can't figure it out but it's like I have a cold that never goes away. The bandage gets wet and I have to change it often and it's hard closing the safety pin at the back of my head.

I am wearing my old army fatigue jacket.

So, I am well covered up, face and body, although I don't know what I am going to do when summer comes and the weather gets hot. Right now, it's March, cold and rainy, and

I will worry about summer when it gets here and if I am still around.

Anyway, this gives you an idea of what I look like when I walk down the street. People glance at me in surprise and look away quickly or cross the street when they see me coming.

I don't blame them.

I have plenty of money.

I received all this back pay when I was discharged from Fort Delta. The back pay accumulated during the time I spent in battle in France and then in the hospitals, first in France, then in England.

My money is in cash. Hundred dollar bills and twenties and tens. The smaller bills I keep in my wallet but the rest of the money is stashed in my duffel bag which is always with me, slung over my shoulder. I am like the Hunchback of Notre Dame, my face like a gargoyle and the duffel bag like a lump on my back.

I am staying in the attic tenement in Mrs Belander's three-decker on Third Street. She finally answered the door after I had been knocking for a while, and regarded me with suspicion, not recognizing me. This was proof that the scarf and the bandage were working in two ways: not only to hide the ugliness of what used to be my face, but to hide my identity.

As her small black eyes inspected me from head to toe, I said: 'Hello, Mrs Belander.' A further test.

She didn't respond to my greeting and I realized that she didn't recognize my voice, either. My larynx, which Dr Abrams called my organ of voice, had also been damaged by the grenade and although I can speak, my voice is much lower now and hoarse, as if I have a permanent sore throat.

I remembered what Enrico Rucelli in the last hospital had said about how money talks and I began to draw out my wallet when she said:

'Veteran?'

I nodded, and her face softened.

'Poor boy.'

I followed her up the three flights of stairs, the blue veins in her legs bulging like worms beneath her skin.

The tenement is small, with low slanted ceilings. Two rooms, kitchen and bedroom. The bed, only a cot, really. But everything very neat, windows sparkling, the floor gleaming with wax, the black stove shining with polish.

I glanced out the kitchen window at the steeples of St Jude's Church. Craning my neck, I caught a glimpse between the three-deckers of the neighbourhood, of the slanted roof of the Wreck Centre. I thought of Nicole Renard, realizing I had not thought of her for, oh, maybe two hours.

I turned to find Mrs Belander with her hand out, pink palm turned upwards.

'In advance,' she said.

She had always been generous when I did her errands and her tips paid for my ten-cent movie tickets at the Plymouth on Saturday afternoons. She had baked me a cake for my thirteenth birthday. That was five years ago and it seems like a very long time. Anyway, I paid her a month's rent and she wrote out a receipt on the kitchen table. The table was covered with a red-and-white checked oilcloth like the ones we had at home until the bad times arrived. My caves moistened and I groped for my handkerchief.

She handed me the receipt. It read *Tenant* in her shaky handwriting where my name should have been.

That was fine with me. At that moment, I knew that I was

really anonymous, that I wasn't Francis Joseph Cassavant any more but a tenant in Frenchtown.

'Thank you, Mrs Belander.' Testing again.

'You know my name,' she said, responding this time. Not a question but a statement, suspicion returning to her eyes.

I thought quickly.

'On the mailbox downstairs,' I answered, guessing that her name was there. But a good guess, as she nodded her head, satisfied.

'Stop later, my place,' she said, her Canadian accent making the words sing. 'I make you sturdy soup to help your cold . . .'

After she left I went to the window and looked at the falling rain outside. I was home again in Frenchtown. I thought of the gun hidden away in my duffel bag and knew that my mission was about to begin.

Later, I light a candle in St Jude's Church.

The smell of burning wax and the fragrance of old incense, the odours of forgiveness, fill the church. I remember the days I served as an altar boy for Father Balthazar and the Latin responses I had trouble memorizing.

I kneel at the communion rail and say my prayers.

I pray for Enrico and hope that he will finally go home and adjust to his condition although those are terrible words: adjust and condition. Enrico is now without his legs and is also missing his left arm. 'Thank Christ I'm right-handed,' he said, but I don't think he was really thanking Christ.

I also pray for the souls of my mother and father. When I was six my mother died giving birth to my brother Raymond, who lived only five and a half hours. My father died five years ago of a heart attack in the Rub Room of the Monument Comb Shop although I always felt he really died with my

mother all those years ago. I offer up prayers, too, for my Uncle Louis who gave me a place to live until I joined the army.

I pray, of course, for Nicole Renard, wherever she may be.

And, finally, I pray for Larry LaSalle.

It's hard for me to pray for him and I always hesitate before I can bring myself to say that prayer. Then I think again of what Sister Gertrude taught us in the third grade, words she said came from the mouth of Jesus. Pray for your enemies, for those who have done you harm. It is easy to pray for those you love, she said. But it counts more to pray for those who don't love you, that you don't love.

So I offer up an 'Our Father' and 'Hail Mary' and 'Glory Be' for Larry LaSalle. Then I am filled with guilt and shame, knowing that I just prayed for the man I am going to kill.

Before going to bed, I stand in front of the mirror in the bathroom.

My hair is a mess as usual, thin in some spots, thick in others. For some reason, my hair began to fall out in clumps my first few days in the hospital in France and it has grown back in the same way.

I apply Vaseline to my cheeks.

I make myself look at my caves and the way the shape of my mouth has changed because of the dentures. I roll the dentures around in my mouth and remember what Dr Abrams said, that I should have a better-fitting pair made in a few months when my gums stop shrinking. He also gave me his address in Kansas City where he will be in practice when he returns from the war. 'Great strides have been made in cosmetic surgery, Francis,' he said. 'One of the few benefits of the war. Look me up when you've a mind to.' He was tall

and looked like Abraham Lincoln and should practise his cosmetic surgery on himself, Enrico said.

Enrico always had something to say. About anything and everything. I sometimes think that he talked so much to cover up the pain. Even when he laughed, making a sound like a saw going through wood, you could see the pain flashing in his eyes.

'If you want to forget Nicole,' he said one afternoon when we were tired of cards and checkers, 'here's what you do.' He put down the deck of cards he was practising shuffling with one hand. 'You get out of the army and get yourself to a home for the blind. There must be a good-looking blind girl somewhere just waiting for a nice guy like you.'

I looked to see if he was joking. Even when he was joking, though, it was hard to tell because his voice was always sharp and bitter and the pain never left his eyes.

'You're a big hero,' he said. 'A Silver Star hero. You should have no trouble finding a girl as long as she can't see your face.' He tried to shake a cigarette from his pack of Luckies and three or four fell to the floor. 'A blind girl, now, is right up your alley. . . .'

I am not a hero, of course, and I turn away in disgust, but later that night, lying awake, I wondered if I could really find a blind girl to love me. Ridiculous. What made me think that a blind girl would automatically fall in love with just anyone at all?

'Forget it,' I said to Enrico the next day.

'Forget what?' His voice was a gasp from the pain in his legs that were not there any more. He kept massaging the air that occupied the space his legs used to fill.

'About the blind girl.'

'What blind girl?'

'Never mind,' I said, closing my eyes against the sight of his hand clawing the air.

'It's still Nicole, isn't it?' he said.

I did not have to answer because we both knew it was true.

It would always be Nicole Renard.

And even though I am home from the war, I wonder if I will ever see her again.

I saw Nicole Renard for the first time in the seventh grade at St Jude's Parochial School during arithmetic. Sister Mathilde was standing at the blackboard illustrating a problem in decimals when the piece of chalk in her hands broke and fell to the floor.

I leaped to my feet to retrieve the chalk. We were always eager to keep in the good graces of the nuns who could be ruthless with punishments, using the ruler like a weapon, and ruthless, too, with marks on our report cards.

As I knelt on the floor, the door opened and Mother Margaret, the Sister Superior, swept into the classroom, followed by the most beautiful girl I had ever seen.

'This is Nicole Renard. She is a new student here, all the way from Albany, New York.'

Nicole Renard was small and slender, with shining black hair that fell to her shoulders. The pale purity of her face reminded me of the statue of St Thérèse in the niche next to Father Balthazar's confessional in St Jude's Church. As she looked modestly down at the floor, our eyes met and a flash of recognition passed between us, as if we had known each other before. Something else flashed in her eyes, too, a hint of mischief as if she were telling me we were going to have good times together. Then, the flash was gone and she was

St Thérèse once more, and I knelt there like a knight at her feet, her sword having touched my shoulder. I silently pledged her my love and loyalty for ever.

Sister Mathilde directed her to a vacant seat in the second row nearest the window. She settled herself in place and didn't give me another glance for the rest of the day.

After that first meeting of our eyes, Nicole Renard ignored me, although I was always aware of her presence in the classroom or the corridor or the schoolyard. I found it hard to glance at her, both hoping and fearing she'd return my glance and leave me blushing and wordless. She never did. Was the look that passed between us that first day a wish of my imagination?

Luckily, she became friendly with Marie LaCroix who lived above us on the third floor of our house on Fifth Street. The girls often walked home from school together – Nicole lived one street over on Sixth – and I trailed after them, happy to be following in Nicole's footsteps. They giggled and laughed, their school books pressed against their chests, and I hoped that one of Nicole's books would fall to the ground so that I could rush forward and pick it up.

Once in a while, Nicole visited Marie on the third floor, and I lurked on the piazza below, trying to listen to their conversations, hoping to hear my name. I heard only the murmur of their voices and occasional bursts of laughter.

Standing at the banister in an agony of love and longing, like a sentry on lonely guard duty, I waited for Nicole to come down the stairs so that I could get a glimpse of her and perhaps catch her attention. She'd come into view, my mouth would instantly dry up and I would look away, afraid that my voice would emerge as a humiliating squeak if I tried to say hello. A moment later, I'd hear her footsteps fading away and I'd

plunge into an agony of regret, vowing to talk to her the next time.

Often, in the evening, when families gathered on the piazzas, the men drinking beer they had brewed in big crocks in the dirt-floored cellars and the women mending socks and knitting as they chatted, I'd seek out Marie and try to get her to mention Nicole Renard. Although we were separated by that chasm of being twelve years old, when boys and girls barely acknowledged each other's existence, Marie and I spoke to each other once in a while because we lived in the same three-decker.

Sitting on the steps, we'd talk about everything and nothing. She liked to tell jokes. She'd imitate Sister Mathilde, who had trouble with her digestion and tried to disguise her burps behind her hand, and sometimes rushed out of the classroom, slamming the door behind her. 'She lets off her farts in the corridor,' Marie maintained, doing a quick imitation of those corridor farts.

Baseball was a big topic with us. Monument has always been a baseball town, and Frenchtown teams, made up of players from the shops, often won the city championship in the Twilight Industrial League. Marie's older brother, Vincent, was an all-star shortstop for the Frenchtown Tigers and my father, whose nickname was Lefty, had been an all-star catcher for the same team years before.

I kept wondering how to bring Nicole Renard into the conversation. She had no brothers and sisters about whom I could inquire. I didn't know whether she liked to read or who her favourite movie stars might be. Finally, I plunged. We had fallen into a comfortable silence, listening to the men arguing mildly about the Red Sox, and I said: 'Nicole Renard seems very nice.' Feeling the colour creeping into my cheeks.

Marie turned and fixed her eyes on me.

'Yes,' she said.

I said nothing more. Marie didn't speak, either. My father's voice reached us with his old refrain: how selling Babe Ruth to the Yankees had brought a curse upon the team.

'Do you like her?' she asked, finally.

My breath came fast. 'Who?'

An exasperated sigh escaped her. 'Nicole, Nicole Renard.'

'I don't know,' I said, cheeks incinerating now. I didn't know what to do with my hands.

'Then why did you ask about her?'

'I don't know,' I said again, feeling stupid and trapped, knowing I had fallen into Marie LaCroix's clutches and that she'd probably blackmail me for ever.

Finally, I threw myself on her mercy. 'Yes,' I said. 'I like her.' Astonished at the relief I felt at this admission, I wanted to shout from the rooftops: 'I love her with all my heart.'

'Please don't tell her,' I pleaded.

'Your secret is safe with me,' Marie said.

But was it? Yet, deep within me was the knowledge that I wanted her to tell Nicole Renard that I loved her.

Three days later, Marie and Nicole again passed time together on the piazza above me. I sat reading *The Sun Also Rises*, realizing that Ernest Hemingway seldom used big three-syllable words, which made me wonder if anyone, including me, could become a writer.

When I heard Nicole making noises of departure, her footsteps crossing the floor as she called 'Bye-bye' to Marie, I closed the book and perched on the banister, positioning myself where it would be impossible for her to ignore my presence.

Hearing her footsteps on the stairs, I curled my legs around the rungs of the banister.

She came into view.

I didn't look away this time.

'Don't fall off, Francis,' she said, as she passed quickly by and went down the stairs.

I was so startled by her voice, by the fact that she had actually spoken to me, that I almost *did* fall off the banister. Regaining my balance, I realized that she had actually spoken my name. *Don't fall off, Francis.* My name had been on her lips! Then I winced in an agony of embarrassment. Why hadn't I answered her? Does she now think I'm stupid, unable to start a conversation? Had she merely been teasing me? Or had she been really afraid that I might fall off the banister? The questions left me dazed with wonder. I never knew that love could be so agonizing. Finally, the big question: had Marie told Nicole that I liked her?

I never learned the answers to those questions. Marie and I never talked about Nicole again. She was always coming and going in a hurry, and I was too timid to try to corner her. Summer vacation started and everyone fell into different routines. Nicole didn't visit our three-decker any more. I caught sight of her sometimes on Third Street going in or coming out of a store and my breath caught. I saw her strolling the convent grounds with Sister Mathilde one hot summer afternoon.

One evening as I hung out in front of Laurier's Drug Store with Joey LeBlanc and some other kids, I saw her walking across the street, her white dress a blur in the darkening evening. She looked our way and waved.

I waved back, thrilled at her attention.

Joey also waved, calling out: 'Hey, Nicole, you've got a

run in your stocking.' Laughing at what he thought was a witty remark. He couldn't see her stockings at that distance, of course.

Nicole paused, tilting her head as if puzzled, Joey burst into more laughter and Nicole walked on, quickening her step.

'You've got a big mouth,' I told Joey, turning away in disgust.

'What's the matter with you?' he asked.

I didn't answer.

I wondered whether she'd been waving at Joey LeBlanc or me.