Extract 1 Chapter 1

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 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.

Extract 2 Chapter 2

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.
The Centre opened its doors the day after St Jude’s Parochial School closed for summer vacation. I stood with the other kids at nine o’clock in the June morning in front of the building. A tall slim man stepped into view, a lock of blond hair tumbling over his forehead, a smile revealed dazzling movie-star teeth.

‘Good morning,’ he said. ‘My name is Larry LaSalle.’

‘Is that his real name?’ Joey LeBlanc asked in a whisper that carried over the crowd. He was often punished by the nuns for talking out of turn.

‘That’s right – it’s real,’ Larry LaSalle said. And for some reason, the crowd applauded.

Larry LaSalle had the broad shoulders of an athlete and the narrow hips of a dancer. He was both. He swung the bat with authority as he hit home runs in games at the sandlot next door and later led us through vigorous exercises and callisthenics. He was also a dancer, with a touch of Fred Astaire in his walk, his feet barely touching the floor. He could tap-dance with machine-gun speed and make daring leaps across the stage. But he was most of all a teacher, leading classes in dancing, arts and crafts, organising a choral group, directing musical shows.

Rumours told us that Larry LaSalle had also been a star, performing in night-clubs in New York and Chicago. Someone brought in a faded newspaper clipping, showing him in a tuxedo, standing beside a night-club placard that read ‘Starring Larry LaSalle’. We knew little about him, however, and he discouraged questions. We knew that he was born in Frenchtown and his family left to seek their fortunes elsewhere. Larry had taken dance lessons at Madame Toussaint’s studio downtown as a boy and had won first prize in an amateur contest at Monument City Hall when he was nine or ten.

Why did he turn his back on show business and return to Frenchtown?

No one dared to ask him, although there were dark hints that he had ‘gotten into trouble’ in New York City, a rumour Joey LeBlanc delighted in repeating, with raised eyebrows and a knowing look.

Dazzled by his talent and his energy, none of us dwelt on the rumours. In fact, the air of mystery that surrounded him added to his glamour. He was our champion and we were happy to be in his presence.
Paddle met ball. I didn’t try for speed or spin, merely wanted to place the ball in proper position, without risk, and then play my defensive game. My heartbeat was steady, my body poised for action. The ball came back to me. I returned. Came again and again I returned. Larry LaSalle’s return was placed perfectly, at the edge of the table, almost impossible for me to reach but somehow I reached it, returned it, throwing him off balance. My point. Next point his, then mine again. Then his.

We were half-way through the game, the score standing at 13-12, my serve, when I realised that he was letting me win, was guiding the game with such skill that no one but me realised what he was doing. He cleverly missed my returns by what seemed like a thousandth of an inch, feigning frustration, and placed his returns in seemingly impossible spots, but within my reach.

Finally, the score stood at 20-19. My favour. One point away from victory. I resisted meeting Larry LaSalle’s eyes. It was still his serve. Crouching, waiting, I finally looked at him, saw his narrowed eyes. They were suddenly inscrutable, mysterious. A shudder made me tremble, as I realised that he could easily win the next two points and take the championship away from me. He could win it so easily and so humiliatingly that the crowd – Nicole – would know instantly that he had been toying with me all along.

In the dance classes, Nicole was the most talented of all, her slender body dipping and turning without effort, as if her bones were elastic. Jealousy streaked through me as Larry LaSalle tossed her in the air, letting her fly, defying gravity for a breathless moment, then caught her, pressing her close, their faces almost touching, their lips only an inch or so from a kiss, before he allowed her to slip down against his body. He applauded her, his eyes looking deeply into hers, as she lay at his feet.

Then, a whimpering, like a small animal caught and trapped, moaning distinct now. The scratching of the needle stopped. Footsteps approaching, coming close, closer, and suddenly she stumbled into the hallway, her face caught in the slash of moonlight.

She saw me the moment I saw her. Saw her face, her eyes. Her hair dishevelled, mouth flung open, lips swollen. Cheeks moist with tears. Her white blouse torn and one hand clutching the front of her blouse to hold it together.

I drew out of the darkness towards her and she raised a hand to stop me, gasping now, her breath like a moan escaping her body.