

## APPEARANCES AND REALITY

John Woolfrey

COMPREHENDING *Québécois* (QUEBEC FRENCH) is often not easy. Vowels get swallowed and consonants all seem to run into each other. There are regional differences across the province. The English speaker with only high-school French usually understands nothing more than the simplest of phrases, and usually only when they're spoken slowly. And slow is not how most *Québécois* like to speak. Few newcomers master Quebec French, even after several years of living in Montreal; and those of us native Montrealers whose mother tongue is English don't always understand everything we hear, especially jokes bantered about in a group.

I've always thought that Quebec French is to international French what English in the southern US is to North-American English. As in Dixie, Quebec diphthongs are exaggerated, broad, and drawn out, often in a minor key; like a plaint. Both groups use very colourful expressions and metaphors, and address others as though everyone has known everyone else for a long time. In Quebec the informal *tu* for "you" is used almost all the time, even when speaking to little old ladies. Both groups show a fondness for composite names, such as Bobbie-Joe in the South and Jean-Marc in Quebec.

All who have adopted French—any language, for that matter—as a second language have found their word power enriched, and usually to their great pleasure. Sentiments that would sound flowery in the pragmatic English can be expressed in French in such a way that is pleasant, light and *enchanteur* (see, it's only natural—wouldn't it sound a bit fey to say "enchanting"?). French can be a fun language—especially the Quebec variety, with its *joual*, a pan-Quebec patois; essential in communicating with a fun people.

I think some people have a gift for learning a second language while others simply do not. I've met several intelligent people who are very knowledgeable, well educated and even very creative in their own language, whether French or English, but simply fall apart when trying to utter a few words in the other tongue. But even the least-educated Montrealer is often equally at ease in both French and English, jumping back and forth, indiscriminately expressing ideas in the other language—to the point where a third one emerges. What we call *Français*.

We all use *Français* a bit from time to time. It's not unusual for bilingual Montrealers in conversation to grab a word or a phrase from the other language, or even switch altogether, depending on which language suits the speaker's needs for a particular subject. Children of immigrants, whose first language might be Portuguese, Chinese, Arabic or any of dozens of others, are particularly adept in conversing in both French and English—both being at once their second languages. Eavesdropping on a group of high school students on a bus must be very frustrating for someone who understands only one or the other. The listener would hear the kids express one string of thought in one language and switch midstream to the other: "I just sat down at the beginning of Algebra, when Marie-André comes up to me, really mad, eh. So I go, '*Qu'est-ce qu'il y a?*' *Pis e' m'a dit.*"

For many of the gay men who come to Montreal from other provinces or the US, it's not just the romance language they love, but the romance they find in the French speaker— Not only the foreign tongue, but the foreigner's tongue.

ONE NIGHT AT LA QUEUE DORÉ I was comfortably perched on my favourite vantage point—the railing overlooking the rear-bar area—watching the crowd, when this guy who’d been flirting each time he passed by finally stopped to talk to me.

“ÿ. What’s your name?” he said.

“James. *Et toi ?*” I said, in a natural response to the Québécois accent I detected.

“Luke,” he replied, and preceded with some more pickup lines. This led to conversation, still in English, but punctuated with a few *bêns*<sup>1</sup> and Gallic shoulder shrugs from him. Whenever I switched to French, he stayed in English. I figured he just wanted to practise.

But it’s considered bad manners for an anglophone, when conversing with a francophone, not to use any French at all—at least enough to show that he can speak it. I felt uncomfortable. “*D’où viens-tu ?*” I asked.

“Hein?” he said, “What’s dat?”

“I said, where’re you from?” somewhat perplexed. Why was I repeating this question in English to an obvious francophone?

“BC,” he said. “Up the coast from a small town. You never heard of it.” I took his word for it.

“Did you move here a long time ago?” I asked, more confused.

“No. Just last year.”

“Then how long were you in BC?”

“I was born there.”

“You speak French up there?” I was desperate to understand.

“No.”

Surely he was pulling my leg. “But you have a Québécois accent!”

Luke shrugged. “No. I don’t know,” he said, smiling. “Do I?”

I laughed. What is going on, I wondered.

Luke was of average height and looks, and about twenty-eight years old. He moved his body in an easygoing way, and his plain, slightly fleshy face with its dark, bright eyes was open and friendly. His teeth strong and white. He smiled broadly and often, and laughed in a rich, raspy baritone. His dark hair was short on the sides and combed to one side on the top to end in little curls. It looked in need of a trim. His body, between average and husky, in a few years might become fattish and drooping. It was a body and a face that looked like they had a fondness for having fun. He told me he’d been working as gardener and maid for a Montreal industrialist and his wife at their country house in the Eastern Townships. Luke was very proud of this job, and frequently recounted incidents that happened there.

He spoke with an overly contrived, crusty queen façade that some gays adopt when introduced into gay society. He made no bones about letting me know he was hopelessly into blonds, and I found his energetic boyishness enticing, despite the queen lines. I knew I could relax with him. Plus I wanted to solve this puzzle about his speaking English with a French accent.

“You’re the same type as my fantasy,” he said, “blond, tall, German looking. I can’t believe you’d be attracted to me.”

I wanted to get my Teutonic paws on that doughy body of his. “You’re hot,” I said.

We eventually went back to my place, where he spoiled me. He was my love-slave in bed, and the next morning almost cuddled me to death. He got up when I got up, anxious to be with his “prize.” While he were dressing he checked out my diplomas. “You’re an intellectual,” he proclaimed. “Oh yeah, you’re a writer,” he remembered.

---

<sup>1</sup> Joul for *bien*. “Well”

“I just write a little bit,” I protested. “And it’s not like I have a PHD or anything. Hardly an intellectual.”

We moved to the kitchen where I made coffee and pancakes. We talked while we ate, and as Luke spoke I listened carefully to the way his diction and satisfied myself that he pronounced several words the way only an English-speaking Canadian could, like “out” and “rainin’”. I asked him again about his “Québécois” accent.

“I guess I’ve met a lot of French guys since I came to Montreal,” he said, shrugging his shoulders. “And I ’ad a couple of French boyfriends. I really like French guys—they’re so hot! And I love Montreal. People are real here, warm. I’ve been trying to learn French but I can’t seem to get it. It’s frustrating.” He cocked his head and pouted his lips, à la Québécoise.

“What brought you to Montreal from BC?” I asked.

Like many people when they find out you write, he was eager to tell me his story. “I ’ad to get away. I tried Vancouver, then Toronto, but I didn’ like the people there. Too cold. I always wanted to live in Montreal, but I didn’ speak French. Finally, one day I was broke in Toronto and some friends were driving here. I just came along. I got a job and everything’s working out okay. I love my job. I feel so lucky.”

“Do you miss your home town?”

Luke was sitting opposite the kitchen window. The grey morning light caught his dark-grey eyes and hair, making them look one and the same colour. As he told his story he flashed his eyes to emphasize important parts.

“Are you kidding? There’s nothing there for me,” he said, taking a sip of his coffee. “I had no father and my mother died when I was fourteen. I had to go into a foster home. The father was a cold kind of guy who didn’t have much to do with us kids—there were some other foster kids there. The father had muscles and tattoos an’ he worked on old cars. One day he started sucking me off. Eventually it became routine—at first I was excited, but at the same time I wasn’t sure. I was a bit uncomfortable, as though it was something I shouldn’t do. I loved it though, and he only did to me what he wanted me to do to him, but it was always when he wanted. I felt I had to do it. This went on for a few years, until I found out he was doing it with the other kids, boys *and* girls. I was mad. I thought I was the only one. The mother knew about it, too, but she didn’t do nothin’. That’s when I left for Vancouver. I was almost eighteen anyway.”

Luke told this story very matter-of-factly, as though it didn’t matter all that much.

“Are you still mad at him?” I asked.

“No. I don’t hate him or anything. An’ I was never in love with him. He was pretty hot, with those muscles, working on those cars. I helped him on the cars. That’s when things would get hot. But that’s behind me now. I don’t write or call or anything. I’m very ’appy now.”

Luke looked pensively out the window at the yard below. “I wasn’t gay after that for a long time,” he said, “till I came to Montreal. I had a friend in Vancouver. A really good friend. But one day I said let’s do something sexual, and then he wasn’t my friend anymore. That’s when I moved to Toronto. I was really unhappy. I missed my friend so much. I blocked it out for a long time, but finally I remembered.”

He shrugged his shoulders, pouted his lips, and, flashing his eyes at me, with a big smile on his boyish face, said, “*Bén*, it’s okay now. I’m very ’appy now.”