

## THE GARDEN OF WONDERS

John Woolfrey

“NEVER GO EAST OF MORGAN’S,” I said.  
“What’s that, and why shouldn’t I go east of it?” asked Michael, impatiently. Michael moved to Montreal two years ago from Vancouver. He’s thirty-six, about six-foot-one, short dark-brown hair, and he usually wears a big earring. His hair and his body are wiry; his disposition wired. As a result of the latter, he’s pretty skinny, with a somewhat bony face, thick, dark eyebrows, and black eyes that dart around ceaselessly. We often go out to bars where we yack for hours. This evening we were in La Queue Dorée.

“Morgan’s was a department store on Philips Square. Now it’s The Bay,” I explained. “I didn’t mean *you* shouldn’t go east of it— I was quoting my mother. Lots of mothers said that to their kids.”

“Really? Why?”

“I never asked. I just lumped it in the same category as ‘never get into a stranger’s car.’”

“Wow. Like the East End was full of child molesters, or something. But when you were older, weren’t you curious?”

“Not until I was fourteen. I was a pretty obedient kid. Rather a priss, really. So I contented myself with exploring the West End and downtown. I didn’t know anybody in the east, anyway.”

“Did you find out why anglo boys shouldn’t go east of— what was it?”

“Morgan’s. Well, sort of.”

“What happened?”

“I wanted to go to the zoo. I’d never been to one. My mother said she was too revolted by the animals always ‘getting sexy.’ And back then there was a children’s zoo in La Fontaine Park called the Garden of Wonders, or *Le Jardin des Merveilles* in French. I figured I’d better go before I got too old for a children’s zoo.

“So I went alone one Sunday afternoon in late June. After I’d been there for awhile, I saw my math teacher from the past year out with his family. I didn’t want him to see me—partly because I was embarrassed at being alone and partly because I was afraid he knew I used to peek down his shirt to see his chest hair when I went up to his desk.”

Michael laughed. “I had a teacher I used to do that to.”

“I figured I’d had enough of monkeys picking each others’ assholes anyway,” I continued, “so I headed for the bus stop. As it came into view, the 24 was just pulling away. I ran to the stop ahead to try to catch it, dodging a car that was creeping along the parking lot. Halfway there I realized I wouldn’t make it, so I walked back to the other stop, which was closer. On the way I became aware of the same car I had just dodged cruising back, moving alongside me, and at the same pace as my walking. I glanced inside and noticed the driver was looking over at me, sort of leering. Once I got to the bus stop, he stopped his car, and gestured with his head ever so slightly that I should come over to him. But the movement was so understated and, well, furtive, I wasn’t sure if I imagined it. So I pretended I didn’t see and looked up Sherbrooke Street for the bus.”

“Was this across from the library?” asked Michael, suspiciously.

“Uh-huh.”

“He thought you were a hustler! I heard that that parking lot and Dominion Square were the places where hustlers went before the village.”

“I had no idea! I didn’t even know the concept!” I said. “So, on the bus-stop sign, somebody had written ONCE EVERY over the number 24: I figured I might have a while to wait. From time to time I looked out the corner of my eye at the blue Chevrolet still parked nearby. I didn’t dare look at the driver. As time crawled on and the car didn’t budge, I was getting rather nervous. Was he a policeman? Had I done something wrong? Was it illegal for English-looking boys from the Town of Mount Royal to venture into the East End?”

“You should have listened to your mother!” Michael schticked.

“Yeah,” I said. “I wasn’t really worried at the time since there were other people waiting for the bus. But I did start wondering if I was getting paranoid when I thought a guy waiting at the bus stop was watching me too. He was kinda weird looking, with narrow shoulders and a face like a turkey vulture.”

Michael made a face: “Eeoo!”

“But after a while I realized I wasn’t paranoid. He *was* staring at me. So was the guy in the car. I didn’t know what was going on. Finally, the turkey-vulture guy spoke: ‘Do you want to come with me?’ he asked, in English.”

“Why in English?” asked Michael.

“You know. Everybody speaks to me in English, even before I open my mouth.”

“Yeah, you look pretty anglo—a real *tête carrée*.<sup>1</sup>”

“So I looked at him. I wondered if he meant what I thought he meant. No, he’s just a little a bit weird and he wants a friend, I thought. Besides, I knew that if I left then I’d get home just in time for Bugs Bunny.”

“Yeah, after all, you were still a kid!”

“So being the polite little bourgeois boy that I was, I looked him straight in the eye and replied, ‘No thank you, but maybe the man in that car would like to,’ indicating the blue Chevrolet to my left.”

“You little snot! You knew the score, all right.”

“I guess so. It’s like I did and I didn’t, you know what I mean?”

“Yeah, I know— At that age ... What happened next?”

“The bus came. I got on and I went to the back, like all teenagers do. As the bus pulled away, I saw the man at the bus stop through the rear window, and I felt a small pang of lost opportunity, I guess. I realized he was offering me something I’d been wanting so long for: sex with a grown man. Surely it would have been some kind of adventure, at least. But as the bus headed west, I looked at him again. He really was unattractive, being turkey-like and all. And I really did want to get home in time to see Bugs Bunny.”

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<sup>1</sup> Literally “square head”: pejorative for English Canadian

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