

"The Street That Got Mislaid" – Patrick Waddington

Marc Girondin had worked in the filing section of the city hall's engineering department for so long that the city was laid out in his mind like a map, full of names and places, intersecting streets and streets that led nowhere, blind alleys and winding lanes.

In all Montreal no one possessed such knowledge; a dozen policemen and taxi drivers together could not rival him. That is not to say that he actually knew the streets whose names he could recite like a series of incantations, for he did little walking. He knew simply of their existence, where they were, and in what relation they stood to others.

But it was enough to make him a specialist. He was undisputed expert of the filing cabinets where all the particulars of all the streets from Abbott to Zotique were indexed, back, forward and across. Those aristocrats, the engineers, the inspectors of water mains and the like, all came to him when they wanted some little particular, some detail, in a hurry. They might despise him as a lowly clerk, but they needed him all the same.

Marc much preferred his office, despite the profound lack of excitement of his work, to his room on Oven Street (running north and south from Sherbrooke East to St. Catherine), where his neighbors were noisy and sometimes violent, and his landlady consistently so. He tried to explain the meaning of his existence once to a fellow tenant, Louis, but without much success. Louis, when he got the drift, was apt to sneer.

"So Craig latches on to Bleury and Bleury gets to be Park, so who cares? Why the excitement?"

"I will show you," said Marc. "Tell me, first, where you live."

"Are you crazy? Here on Oven Street. Where else?"

"How do you know?"

"How do I know? I'm here, ain't I? I pay my rent, don't I? I get my mail here, don't I?"

Marc shook his head patiently.

"None of that is evidence," he said. "You live here on Oven Street because it says so in my filing cabinet at city hall. The post office sends you mail because my card index tells it to. If my cards didn't say so, you wouldn't exist and Oven Street wouldn't either. That, my friend, is the triumph of bureaucracy."

Louis walked away in disgust. "Try telling that to the landlady," he muttered.

So Marc continued on his undistinguished career, his fortieth birthday came and went without remark, day after day passed uneventfully. A street was renamed, another constructed, a third widened; it all went carefully into the files, back, forward and across.

And then something happened that filled him with amazement, shocked him beyond measure, and made the world of the filing cabinets tremble to their steel bases.

One August afternoon, opening a drawer to its fullest extent, he felt something catch. Exploring farther, he discovered a card stuck at the back between the top and bottom. He drew it out and found it to be an old index card, dirty and torn, but still perfectly decipherable. It was labeled RUE DE LA BOUTEILLE VERTE, or GREEN BOTTLE STREET.

Marc stared at it in wonder. He had never heard of the place or of anything resembling so odd a name. Undoubtedly it had been retitled in some other fashion befitting the modern tendency. He checked the listed details and ruffled confidently through the master file of street names. It was not there. He made another search, careful and protracted, through the cabinets. There was nothing. Absolutely nothing.

Once more he examined the card. There was no mistake. The date of the last regular street inspection was exactly fifteen years, five months and fourteen days ago.

As the awful truth burst upon him, Marc dropped the card in horror, then pounced on it again fearfully, glancing over his shoulder as he did so.

It was a lost, a forgotten street. For fifteen years and more it had existed in the heart of Montreal, not half a mile from city hall, and no one had known. It had simply dropped out of sight, a stone in water.

In his heart, Marc had sometimes dreamed of such a possibility. There were so many obscure places, twisting lanes and streets jumbled together as intricately as an Egyptian labyrinth. But of course it could not happen, not with the omniscient file at hand. Only it had. And it was dynamite. It would blow the office sky-high.

Vaguely, in his consternation, Marc remembered how, some time after he first started to work, his section had been moved to another floor. The old-fashioned files were discarded and all the cards made out afresh. It must have been at that time that Green Bottle Street was stuck between the upper and lower drawers.

He put the card in his pocket and went home to reflect. That night he slept badly and monstrous figures flitted through his dreams. Among them appeared a gigantic likeness of his chief going mad and forcing him into a red-hot filing cabinet.

The next day he made up his mind. Pleading illness, he took the afternoon off and with beating heart went looking for the street.

Although he knew the location perfectly, he passed it twice and had to retrace his steps. Baffled, he closed his eyes, consulted his mind's infallible map and walked directly to the entry. It was so narrow that he could touch the adjoining walls with his outstretched hands. A few feet from the sidewalk was a tall and solid wooden structure, much weather-beaten, with a simple latched door in the center. This he opened and stepped inside. Green Bottle Street lay before him.

It was perfectly real, and reassuring as well. On either side of a cobbled pavement were three small houses, six in all, each with a diminutive garden in front, spaced off by low iron palings of a kind that has disappeared except in the oldest quarters. The houses looked extremely neat and well kept and the cobbles appeared to have been recently watered and swept. Windowless brick walls of ancient warehouses encircled the six homes and joined at the farther end of the street.

At his first glance, Marc realized how it had gotten its unusual name. It was exactly like a bottle in shape.

With the sun shining on the stones and garden plots, and the blue sky overhead, the street gave him a momentary sense of well-being and peace. It was completely charming, a scene from a print of fifty years ago.

A woman who Marc guessed was some sixty years of age was watering roses in the garden of the first house to his right. She gazed at him motionless, and the water flowed from her can unheeded to the ground. He took off his hat and announced, "I'm from the city engineering department, madam."

The woman recovered herself and set her watering can down.

"So you have found out at last," she said.

At these words, Marc's reborn belief that after all he had made a harmless and ridiculous error fled precipitately. There was no mistake.

"Tell me, please," he said tonelessly.

It was a curious story. For several years, she said, the tenants of Green Bottle Street had lived in amity with each other and the landlord, who also resided in one of the little houses. The owner became so attached to them that in a gesture of goodwill he deeded them his property, together with a small sum of money, when he died.

"We paid our taxes," the woman said, "and made out a multitude of forms and answered the questions of various officials at regular intervals about our property. Then, after a while, we were sent no notices, so we paid no more taxes. No one bothered us at all. It was a long time before we understood that in some way they'd forgotten about us."

Marc nodded. Of course, if Green Bottle Street had dropped from the ken of city hall, no inspectors would go there, no census takers, no tax collectors. All would pass merrily by, directed elsewhere by the infallible filing cabinet.

"Then Michael Flanagan, who lives at number four," she went on, "a most interesting man, you must meet him--Mr. Flanagan called us together and said that if miracles happened, we should aid and abet them. It was he who had the door built and put up at the entrance to keep out passersby or officials who might come along. We used to keep it locked, but it's been so long since anyone came that we don't bother now."

"Oh, there were many little things we had to do, like getting our mail at the post office and never having anything delivered at the door. Now almost the only visits we make to the outside world are to buy our food and clothes."

"And there has never been any change here all that time?" Marc asked.

"Yes, two of our friends died, and their rooms were empty for a while. Then Jean Desselin--he's in number six and sometimes goes into the city--returned with a Mr. Plonsky, a refugee. Mr. Plonsky was very tired and worn out with his travelings and gladly moved in with us. Miss Hunter, in number three, brought home a very nice person--a distant relative, I believe. They quite understand the situation."

"And you, madam?" Marc inquired.

"My name is Sara Trusdale, and I have lived here for more than twenty years. I hope to end my days here as well."

She smiled pleasantly at him, apparently forgetting for the moment that he carried in his pocket a grenade that could blow their little world to pieces.

All of them, it seemed, had had their troubles, their losses and failures, before they found themselves in this place of refuge, this Green Bottle Street. To Marc, conscious of his own unsatisfactory existence, it sounded entrancing. He fingered the card in his pocket uncertainly. "Mr. Plonsky and Mr. Flanagan took a great liking to each other," Miss Trusdale continued. "Both of them have been travelers and they like to talk about the things they have seen. Miss Hunter plays the piano and gives us concerts. Then there's Mr. Hazard and Mr. Desselin, who are very fond of chess and who brew wine in the cellar. For myself, I have my flowers and my books. It has been very enjoyable for all of us."

Marc and Miss Trusdale sat on her front step for a long time in silence. The sky's blue darkened, the sun disappeared behind the warehouse wall on the left.

"You remind me of my nephew," Miss Trusdale said suddenly. "He was a dear boy. I was heartbroken when he died in the influenza epidemic after the war. I'm the last of my family, you know."

Marc could not recall when he had been spoken to with such simple, if indirect, goodwill. His heart warmed to this old lady. Obscurely he felt on the verge of a great moral discovery. He took the card out of his pocket.

"I found this yesterday in the filing cabinet," he said. "No one else knows about it yet. If it should come out, there would be a great scandal, and no end of trouble for all of you as well. Newspaper reporters, tax collectors . . ."

He thought again of his landlady, his belligerent neighbors, his room that defied improvement. "I wonder," he said slowly, "I am a good tenant, and I wonder . . ."

"Oh yes," she leaned forward eagerly, "you could have the top floor of my house. I have more space than I know what to do with. I'm sure it would suit you. You must come and see it right away."

The mind of Marc Girondin, filing clerk, was made up. With a gesture of renunciation he tore the card across and dropped the pieces in the watering can. As far as he was concerned, Green Bottle Street would remain mislaid forever.