St. Lawrence

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The first time I was ever on the St. Lawrence River was with my father. He would load my mother, my older sister, and me, into his motorboat and navigate from the Verdun Yacht Club to one of the river's many offshore islands for a picnic. In one of my favourite photographs, taken on the Verdun boardwalk near where he moored his boat, my father wears a fishing vest and hip waders, my beautiful mother is smiling, my three-year-old sister Liz grasps a flower in her fist, and there's me at six months, sitting up in a baby carriage wearing a white angora hat. From our early family photographs you'd never guess that we didn't live in the countryside, that we lived instead only a few kilometres from downtown Montreal, which, at that time, was Canada's largest city.

My father's lifelong passion for the stretch of the St. Lawrence River between the Island of Montreal and the south shore, from the Port of Montreal to Lachine and beyond, became the backdrop against which our lives played out. The locus of our family geography, the river was an ever-changing constant that flowed through our lives, sometimes even past our front door. How the river looked and smelled and sounded, in every season of the year, was an elemental force that drew us and held us and shaped us. The living, watery story of the river, and my early life living near it, flowed into me.

It’s easy for Montrealers to forget that they live on an island. The Island of Montreal— Île de Montréal in French or Kawenote Teiontiakon in Kanien’kéha or Mohawk—is formed by the confluence of the Ottawa River to the north and the St. Lawrence River to the south. After the rivers merge, the St. Lawrence—fleuve Saint-Laurent or Ken’tarókwen— flows northeastward to the sea. The river was named in 1535 by French explorer Jacques Cartier, who sailed up the river on the feast day of St. Lawrence, the patron saint of archivists and librarians, like me.

Montrealers frequently orient themselves to Mount Royal, an iconic visual landmark topped by a thirty-metre illuminated cross that is visible for miles, and the river, with its limited direct public access, was largely neglected and unappreciated. In *The Seven Rivers of Canada*, author Hugh MacLennan wrote, “yet the St. Lawrence is more than a river, more even than a system of waters. It has made nations. It has been the moulder of the lives of millions—perhaps by now hundreds of millions—in a multitude of different ways. At some point in my middle years, I realized that I myself belonged to the people whose lives the river has affected.”

Our family also belonged to the St. Lawrence River.

My father grew up a block from the St. Lawrence on Charron Street, now rue Charon, in Point St. Charles/Pointe-Saint-Charles, a neighbourhood just east of downtown Montreal known locally as the Point. When he was a boy in the 1930s, the shoreline of the river, easily accessible over the railway tracks, was a wetland marsh teeming with waterfowl. The river’s edge, filled in and extended a kilometre over the years, was a municipal landfill for industrial and municipal waste, re-developed for the Bonaventure Expressway, and paved over as a parking lot for the Expo 67 World’s Fair.

My father spent all his free time fishing under the Victoria Bridge, the first bridge to span the St. Lawrence, opened in 1859. In one family photograph, my teenaged father proudly holds up a nine-pound doré. The story goes that when he arrived home from fishing early one morning, he burst into his parents’ bedroom as they slept and announced “Dad! Mom! Wake up! Take a look at this fish!” My father also rode the train to Rawdon or Greenfield Park on the south shore of Montreal to hunt rabbits, partridge, and fox.

When he met my mother in the late 1940s, my father introduced her to his world on the river. There are dozens of photographs of her rowing a boat, posing like a pinup by the Lachine

Rapids, a fishing rod in one hand, a string of fish in the other. When they got engaged, my father persuaded my mother to buy a boat and motor rather than waste money on an engagement ring.

After their marriage, my parents moved to an upstairs flat in nearby Verdun, a few blocks from the Verdun Yacht Club where my father moored his twenty-foot motorboat. My father explored the many islands in the St. Lawrence River off Verdun and LaSalle—Hay Island, Goat Island, Devil's Island, The Seven Sisters, Rock, Heron, and Mud Pie Island—and learned to navigate the river's currents, reefs, trenches, sandbars, and the ferocious Lachine Rapids. It was on the St. Lawrence that my father discovered what he felt was his real life and his authentic self, as a riverman. The river became his escape, his muse, the thing he tested himself against and measured himself by.

Depending on the season, my father often fished or hunted ducks before work, and sometimes after work he spent a few more hours on the river. He built a duck boat and learned to carve his own decoys. Kept detailed fishing and hunting records, made notes about the river, and recorded his plans for the season. In a story about one duck hunting trip he wrote "It had been hard work getting set up and I was cold. In addition, I had forgotten the cushion for my head and was uncomfortable too. Oh well, I thought, any sort of hunt is infinitely better than staying home."

When my sister and I were born my father took us with him to the marina, where he drank beer with his hunting and fishing buddies. There are photographs of my sister grinning in the bow of the boat, of me as a baby, asleep on a blanket near the wide wild river, of my grandparents, his brothers and friends, cooking over a little fire on an island in the St. Lawrence with the Mount Royal cross in the distance.

We moved to a historic red brick farmhouse on LaSalle Boulevard/Boulevard LaSalle, in Ville LaSalle, the neighbourhood directly south of Verdun. The living room window in our main floor flat had an unobstructed view of the St. Lawrence River. These days the shoreline in front of the house has been infilled to create Parc des Rapides, a popular spot for surfers, anglers, and birdwatchers, but in the Christmas 1954 photographs my grandfather took from our front porch, the Lachine Rapids are steps away across a narrow road.

The seven-kilometre stretch of treacherous whitewater that is the Lachine Rapids is so formidable that the early voyageurs believed a sea serpent must live beneath the turbulent water, thrashing in torment. On first encountering the rapids, explorer Samuel de Champlain wrote “my hair stood on end to see such an awful place.”

While the rapids confounded Europeans, the Kanien’kéha from the Kahnawà:ke Mohawk reserve on the south shore of Montreal expertly navigated them for centuries. In fact in 1884, fifty-six Kahnawà:ke Mohawks were among a group of skilled boatmen recruited by the British army to navigate the treacherous cataracts and rapids on the Nile River in Egypt for an expedition to rescue British Major Charles Gordon in Khartoum, Sudan. Also on that expedition was a regiment of Gordon Highlanders, including my Scottish great-grandfather, Private William Wood.

Photographs of me as a toddler, playing on the front path with the white-crested Lachine Rapids roiling in the background, highlight the ever-present threat of the dangerous river. Because as magnificent as the majestic river is, it is far from benign. After the St. Lawrence Seaway opened in 1958, the fast-moving river was more controlled, but it was never tamed, remained frighteningly hazardous, and every kid was ordered to steer clear of it. Over the years, it’s taken the lives of many, from teenagers shooting the rapids on a dare to experienced rivermen like my father.

In all the seasons of the year my father loved to stand at the living room window and watch the St. Lawrence River in all its guises. In winter, glittering bluish-white ice fanned out from shore towards Heron Island, the frozen landscape of the south shore in the distance. In spring, when the ice melted, the river rose up its banks and the turbulent rapids churned at their fullest force. On muggy summer days my father would watch the dazzling patterns of sunlight on the river and pronounce it a perfect day for fishing and a family picnic on Hay Island.

My father was a baby when his parents and brother emigrated to Canada. They sailed in 3rd class steerage from Glasgow to Quebec City on the SS Metagama, then boarded the train to Montreal, where their family had already settled in Point St. Charles. There were times, especially in those early years, when my grandmother was homesick for Scotland.

“Do you think we’ll over go back to visit?” she once asked her husband, George.

“I don’t have a good enough job to afford it,” George told her. “And if I ever get a better job, I’ll never leave it!”

In 1958, a year after my grandfather died, my grandmother, Lizzie, who we called Nanny, blew his life insurance money on a lavish visit home to Scotland. The family gathered at the Port of Montreal, dressed in their Sunday best, for the big sendoff. That day, Nanny was like a different person to me. Instead of wearing a housedress and support stockings, an apron tied around her waist, she wore a flowered dress, a corsage of real carnations pinned to a navy-blue coat, white gloves, and a flowered hat. My darling Nanny, about to board this giant gleaming white ocean liner, the Empress of England, and sail away under the Jacques Cartier Bridge, up the St. Lawrence River, and far across the ocean. It was exciting and a little frightening.

I craned my neck and searched for her in the throngs of passengers on deck, peering at the faces of strangers. And then the streamers began to float down, pink and blue and white and yellow paper streamers unraveling down like coloured rain. This river, our river, was taking Nanny away. I grabbed a pink streamer in my small fist, hoping that Nanny was at the other end of it, and that she would come back to me.

From the late 1940s until 1971, my grandparents and a few of my aunts and uncles rented summer cottages at Port Lewis, eighty kilometres southwest of Montreal on Lake St. Francis/lac Saint-François, one of three stretches of the St. Lawrence River so wide they’re called lakes.

We’d arrive for the weekend with lawn chairs, coolers of food, and plenty of liquor, and sprawl out on the lake-front lawn of my grandmothers’ cottage, which had three tiny bedrooms and a screened-in porch with two daybeds where us kids often slept. Nanny cooked oat cakes and shortbread and fruit pies in the wood stove, and our only job was to fill buckets of water from the hand pump and haul them back for her. Sometimes my father piloted his motorboat from Verdun, under the Mercier Bridge, past Beauharnois and Valleyfield, to Lake St. Francis, and all the way to Port Lewis, a tricky section of the St. Lawrence to navigate, and a very long way.

The St. Lawrence Seaway, a system of locks, canals, and channels stretching three-hundred kilometres between the Great Lakes and Montreal, including a section through Lake St. Francis, was officially opened by Queen Elizabeth II in 1959. The Seaway changed both the course of the St. Lawrence River and its shoreline, and dramatically impacted communities along the river. The Mohawks of Kahnawà:ke, which means “on the rapids,” had more than 1,200

acres of their reserve land expropriated by the government for the Seaway project. As a result, the community lost direct access to the river and their fishing grounds, and became "on the rapids" no more.

My parents saved enough for a down payment on their first home, a small bungalow in Châteauguay, across the river from LaSalle, reached via the Honoré Mercier Bridge. The south end of the Mercier Bridge was built in the 1930s on the parish of Saint-Louis-de-Caughnawaga, now the Kahnawà:ke Mohawk Territory. The Dominion Bridge Company trained three Mohawk riveting gangs, renowned for having no fear of heights, who in turn trained others. In 1990, Kahnawà:ke protesters blocked the Mercier Bridge and all approaching highways for seventy-eight days in solidarity with their brethren in Kanehsatà:ke, in what was known as the Oka crisis.

My parents struggled with the monthly mortgage payments, and for a time they were unable to afford insurance for their car. My father had to leave for work at 5:30 a.m. for the very long commute by bus to the Northern in Point St. Charles. After a few years it was all too much. They decided that Châteauguay was too far away from Montreal, my father's work, our family, and the river.

We moved to a rented flat on Orchard Avenue in LaSalle, half a block from the St. Lawrence River near the Mercier Bridge. There was the river, our river, visible from our second floor balcony, a grey-green force of nature flowing right to left to the sea. Up the street was a park with a swimming pool in summer and a skating rink in winter, and our school, Cecil Newman Elementary, named for the first mayor of LaSalle, now called École L'Eau Vive. Each summer, when the heat and humidity were just right, an invasion of shadflies, also known as mayflies, swarmed in the millions around the streetlights near the river. When the insects died after only a few days, the dry smelly husks formed drifts that people shoveled off the sidewalk like snow.

I caddied for my father at the LaSalle Golf Club, a nine-hole course built on what had been the fields and pastures of a farm overlooking the St. Lawrence River. Formerly Rapids Farm, owned by the Ogilvie Mills family, the farmhouse served as the clubhouse, with a kitchen at the back and a bar in what had been the living and dining rooms. My father carried his golf bag and before

each shot he set the bag down and asked me to hand him the club he required; a six iron, a certain wood, the putter. After he completed the nine holes, he bought me a bag of hickory sticks and a Fanta orange drink and asked the ladies who worked in the kitchen to keep an eye on me while he drank in the bar. I sat on the wooden steps in the afternoon sun and gazed at the long straight row of poplar trees that ran perpendicular to the river along the first fairway. Sunlight glinted off the wide grey-green river visible between the trees. Sometimes the light bounced off the waves of the churning Lachine Rapids and sent fountains of light like sparkler flames into the air.

We moved to a newly-built townhouse on a small cul-de-sac in LaSalle a few blocks from the river. It was here that our family first thrived, then imploded. Our last home together as family before we scattered to the four winds.

In 1967, after a summer spent visiting the Expo 67 World's Fair, I started grade eight at John Grant High School in Lachine. The school was located a few blocks from Lake St. Louis/lac Saint-Louis, another of the lakes created by a widening of the St. Lawrence River.

In Montreal there were French and English Catholic high schools, Jewish schools, and a handful of English Protestant schools for everyone else. John Grant students were a melange of first-generation immigrants from Northern Ireland, Scotland, and the West Indies, Sikhs, and Mohawk kids from the Caughnawaga, now Kahnawà:ke Mohawk reserve, across the river.

The school bus traveled down 90th Avenue to the river, turned right onto LaSalle Boulevard, and followed the shoreline of the St. Lawrence under the Mercier Bridge, past historic Fleming Mill and the fur trade post at the Lachine Canal, and along the lakeshore road to 36th Avenue. There were narrow sections of the road that ran near to the river's edge. On wintry days I pressed my face to the window, gazed out at the broad expanse of frozen river, and imagined the school bus pitching off the icy road, bursting a hole through the ice, and disappearing without a trace.

When I was fifteen, I met Brian, who was smoking a cigarette just outside the Boys Entrance at John Grant High. Brian's memory of our meeting was that I held a copy of Richard Brautigan's *The Abortion* and he asked me about it. I was a troubled teen, and Brian a patient listener. At lunch, we'd walk out to the lighthouse on the point that juts out into Lake St. Louis, talk about poetry, and life, and watch the colour of the river change in the afternoon light.

After graduating from high school at age seventeen, I attended John Abbott College in Sainte-Anne-de-Bellevue, further west of Lachine on Lake St. Louis. I lived in a tiny single dormitory room overlooking the St. Lawrence River in Stewart Hall, the old women's residence of what was once McGill University's Macdonald College.

When all the brilliant gold and red autumn leaves had fallen, stripping the tree branches bare, I had a panoramic view of the river. In winter the luminous white snow, which turned a steely dark blue in the afternoon shadows, would darken to purple. I'd walk along Lakeshore Drive/Bord-du-Lac to the Rex Theatre in the village of Sainte-Anne-de-Bellevue and sit alone watching whatever double-bill was playing that week. I recall the bone-chilling damp, the bitterly cold air off the ice-bound river, the pitch-blackness, my deep loneliness. At night, outside my window was a blank, black, void. I couldn't see the river, but I knew it was there.

Finally, the long months of cold and darkness gave way to the light and warmth of spring. The solid ice on the river broke into chunks and floated away. The constant movement of the St. Lawrence, flowing steadfastly northeast, from one place to the next, from this place to somewhere else. And somewhere else was where I longed to go.

A few years later I moved west, joining an exodus of Anglophones leaving Quebec. In the 1980s I would return to live in Montreal and share a flat with a newly divorced Brian for a year, before heading back to Vancouver for good.

In 1987, at the age of sixty-three, my father and his dog, Pepper rowed a sixteen-foot dory four thousand kilometres over two summers on the old voyageur river route from Alberta to Montreal. The grand finale of his Pull For Canadian Unity voyage was an attempt to shoot his beloved Lachine Rapids. My father recruited an expert riverman to be his safety boat, and a Montreal television crew was on hand to film it. The three-minute segment broadcast on Pulse News shows my father being interviewed before he got in the dory, the harrowing seconds before he capsized, and the moments after, when he was hauled into the boat by the seat of his pants. In addition to the edited segment, the videotape includes outtakes, including a shot of my father back at the oars, a radiant smile on his face, heading under the Mercier Bridge to the Port of Montreal.

When I received the call to let me know that my father had finally arrived, I imagined him on the St. Lawrence River, rowing past the house on LaSalle Boulevard, and the Verdun

riverfront where he moored his boat, and past the foot of Charron Street where he fished as a boy.

Over the years, each time I visited Montreal, Brian would take me on a tour of our hometown haunts. One October, autumn leaves blazed in the afternoon sunshine as Brian drove north, then west on the road that follows Rivière des Prairies, a delta channel of the Ottawa River, to Senneville and Sainte-Anne-de-Bellevue, where the reverse tour of my life along the St. Lawrence began.

The Rex Theatre in Sainte-Anne-de-Bellevue was boarded up. At Stewart Hall, I gazed up at the window of what had been my dorm room.

"Remember the night I slept on your floor?" Brian asked.

I didn't. But then there’s so much of that tumultuous time in my life that I can’t recall.

We passed the Maples Inn in Pointe-Claire, where we saw The Rabble perform, and the community hall in Dorval where we attended our first folk concerts. One winter night after we missed the last bus, we walked all the way home for miles and miles along the river road in the falling snow.

At the Boys’ Entrance of John Grant High School, now a boarded-up derelict building, I photographed Brian smoking a cigarette, just as he used to. We continued along the familiar route the school bus used to travel, across the bridge over the Lachine Canal into LaSalle near the historic fur trade post. We stopped outside the apartment building in the LaSalle Heights where Brian’s family lived, and the townhouse where my family lived. The old brick farmhouse on LaSalle Boulevard still stood, but the LaSalle Golf Course was now a housing development. We stopped at my parents’ first flat on Osborne Avenue in Verdun, where my sister and I were born, and at the flat in Point St. Charles where my father lived until he married Mom, and where his obsession with the river first took hold.

“Thanks so much,” I said later, as we relaxed at Brian and his wife Janet’s condo downtown. “That was great.”

“When you emailed to ask if I’d take you on a trip down memory lane, I thought you had cancer,” he said. “I thought you were dying.”

In the end, it was Brian who got cancer and died. Never again will we tour the Island of Montreal on a crisp autumn afternoon and reminisce about our shared history and geography. My father and mother and grandmother and aunts and uncles, gone now too.

The one constant from my first nineteen years living near the St. Lawrence River was the forever-changing and unchanged river itself. While other childhood places conjure an unsettling melancholy, the beauty and grandeur of the St. Lawrence River, the familiar sight and sound and smell of it, evokes a pure and uncomplicated sense of place, of permanence and belonging, in an uncertain world.

The next time I visit Montreal, I will stand on the riverbank in front of the old house on LaSalle Boulevard, savour the thrilling wildness of the Lachine Rapids, and let the memories of everything and everyone I've loved roar in my ears.