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## Neighborhoods to Love

*Catch the sun, Dad.  
See there it is!"  
I skate behind my son  
And see the light  
Playing on the ice  
Just in front of us.  
Julian skates towards and through it.  
"I've got the sun! Dad.  
I've got the sun!"  
And we skate  
into an infinity  
Of moments,  
The sun, the ice,  
Julian and I.*

— from Canal Seasons

PATTY AND I ARE VISITING our son Julian who lives in a run-down section of Montreal around Avenue du Parc and Saint Viateur. The pavement is cracked. The sidewalks tilt. The buildings sag. The balconies cling rather than hang to the sides of houses. There aren't enough trees. This neighborhood needs a green plan for their streets. A small fountain on a street corner would sure be nice, some

street furniture. I tick off the many things that need to be done to bring the neighborhood up to scratch. The list is a long one. It would take a hard working city councilor ten years to make a dent in it.

I love it. I love Avenue du Parc from the second my foot hits the sidewalk. The sidewalks are alive with all kinds of folks. There are a lot of Hasidic Jews in the neighborhood who stroll along for their evening promenade in black suits, ear locks and black hats. A young man passes me with his wife pushing a baby carriage. His suit may be from another century, but the cut of it is perfect and the cloth looks so fine it could be black silk. I find myself staring impolitely, jaw agape. It's like watching a Quaker from the 17<sup>th</sup> century suddenly emerge through the curtain of time and appear before me, large as life. The young man glances at me and with one proud regard indicates his family is perfect before strolling on his way. His wife, on the other hand, looks a little tired which is understandable as she is pregnant and pushing another baby in the carriage in front of her.

Julian takes us down a narrow side street and we stop for supper at a tiny hole-in-the-wall restaurant. The tables are all jammed together. There is a rough plastic curtain around the inside of the door which allows the restaurant to keep the front door open for fresh air but also cuts the direct breeze from the street. The only table left is one right behind the curtain. We take it. The kitchen is open and about the same size or bigger than the eating area. The aroma of cooking food is delightful. It feels like we have fallen into a little piece of heaven.

The young woman who serves us does so in French but she speaks across the room to someone else in fluent, musical, rather wonderful Italian. She is a light chocolate in color as is one of the cooks, and I can't help but wonder where this restaurant has come from? How is it that the waitress speaks Italian like an Italian, French like a French woman and serves food that is flavored by Africa?

I order the Italian sausage, rice and something green. It is served quickly along with some wisecracks between Julian and the waitress whom I attempt to ignore, as older men in the presence of their wives are required to be modest in the presence of beautiful young waitresses. The meal is very simple and very tasty. I do my best to savor the experience and resist the impulse to Hoover the fine food down as if I were a car backing up to a gas pump.

In the window seat a couple of homeboys sit wearing a good deal of heavy jewelry. If they aren't in the drug trade already they look like they want to be. At another table there is a woman who is reading her

newspaper and does not want to be disturbed. The woman sitting at the table closest to me has no newspaper and is quite willing to exchange a few companionable sentences with our table so we do. Opposite there is a very handsome gay couple. Being the kind of person who delights in casual eavesdropping, I am anxious to overhear their conversation, but these two men are hardened café goers and have clearly mastered the technique of speaking just loudly enough to hear each other but not loud enough for anyone else. It's frustrating because I am sure their conversation is worth hearing. Are they talking about business deals? Perhaps some article in *Le Devoir* which has antagonized them? Or better, who is sleeping with whom? Always a favorite of mine. Every now and then I cast a beseeching regard their way to please speak up, unfortunately to no avail.

The cappuccino arrives and is so perfect that I can't help it, I order a second. Maybe there is someone in the world who can make cappuccino better than the Italians but I've never been able to find them.

Just before we go I am finally able to sort out where this restaurant has flown in from: it is out of the old Italian-Ethiopian colony of Eritrea. The waitress is a refugee from the latest war to break out between Eritrea and Ethiopia. Our gain, their loss. The waitress smiles and for a fleeting second a shadow passes across her beautiful face.

Julian, Patty and I pay our bill and stroll out into the June evening.

We are going to walk across town to St. Laurent to hear my cousin's band Veal play, but we have plenty of time and we mosey along the busy streets taking in the soft evening air. The walk gives me plenty of time to reflect on why I feel so at home in this tumble-down neighborhood. I do because in its essentials it feels like my own. Although on the surface they could not be more different for one is rich, the other poor.

Patty and I live in the Glebe. As I write this it is the most desired neighborhood in all of Canada based on real estate demand. Every time a "for sale" sign goes up there are ten buyers at the door with fistfuls of money offering more than the sellers are asking. Our front door gets flyers pushed through the mailbox from real estate agents telling us that they are not soliciting "a listing," but our house fits exactly the description that a client of theirs wants. If we will just take the time to let the agent know, she or he can hook us up immediately with a client. We will be sure to find the sale price agreeable. Everyone would be so happy if we would just move out and let someone with more money move in.

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But in spite of its upscale façade the Glebe and Avenue du Parc are both nothing more than old streetcar neighborhoods. They were built in the days when the streetcar was the principal form of urban transportation. Their main streets are not traffic sewers designed only to flush cars along to some other destination but places people live on, promenade, shop and chat with their neighbors. In 2003 Avenue du Parc may be a lot poorer than Bank Street in the Glebe but it wasn't when we moved in 30 years ago.

At that time Bank Street was in full decline: empty storefronts, lots of folks on welfare, lots of cheap housing and lots of destructive absentee landlords. The Glebe was built in the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century as a substantial place with large brick homes, broad streets and a prosperous main street just like Avenue du Parc was, and it remained that way until the early sixties. At that time the popular mayor of the day, Charlotte Whitton, decided that streetcars around which the community had been built were old fashioned and ugly with their overhead wires and rails buried in the street's surface. Besides they were old and badly needed to be replaced. All in all it was easier to simply trash them for buses as had already been done in other cities across North America.

In 1960 Ottawa had over 300 miles of electric streetcar lines which served the city quietly and efficiently from distant West End beaches to the French-speaking neighborhoods in the east. It was one of the oldest electric systems on the continent. Tearing the streetcar rails up changed the entire face of the city. The principal commercial streets of the city — Sparks, Rideau, Bank and Wellington — went into a precipitous decline from which they have never recovered while the car-dominated suburbs exploded.

In the old streetcar neighborhoods, cars began to flood along what used to be quiet residential avenues. Each driver was anxious to use the streets to get quickly through to the downtown or to escape the downtown to the distant neighborhoods. The car privatized the streets, turning the city's greatest asset into private traffic sewers. "Get the fuck out of my way!" was the attitude of most drivers. Turning lanes went in on every corner. Sidewalks were narrowed. Informal public squares became interchanges for cars and trucks. People and businesses quickly began to abandon the old parts of the city.

The Glebe's schools which dated back to the 1890s went unrepaired. Their dark brick sides started to take on the grim look of old factory buildings. By 1970 a third of the children at First Avenue Public School were from families on social assistance. The housing

itself reflected the schools. In the 1930s and 40s the houses had the hauteur of the bourgeois: solid, respectable and comfortable. By the 1970s they looked dilapidated, dour and sour. Street after street of sad brown homes stood on small, grubby urban lots. The houses themselves were owned more and more by pensioners or by absentee landlords interested in rental profits and depended on young tenants who didn't complain about shoddy maintenance.

Bank Street, the principal commercial street, was caving in on itself with empty storefronts. The ones that had survived didn't offer much. There was some talk at City Hall of filling in and paving over the Rideau Canal to provide a convenient expressway downtown. The future of the city was out in the green, pleasant and prosperous suburbs. It was slash and burn in the oldest parts of the city. The oldest industrial neighborhood in the city, Lebreton Flats, was simply expropriated from one end to the other and torn down. Over 150 acres of brick row housing, small hotels, bars and warehouses were flattened by bulldozers and turned into a snow dump. The downtown neighborhoods had become a discard zone.

Patty and I moved into the Glebe for exactly the same reason other young couples did: we had no money, no car, and rents were cheap. It was convenient. We had no plans to stay. It was just a stop on our way to a better place. We had no idea the neighborhood was about to begin a long climb up from Sorry Town into one of the most desired neighborhoods in the country.

It began with the most unlikely of ideas, a skating rink. Doug Fullerton was appointed the chair of the federal government's National Capital Commission. He was an imaginative and iconoclastic man, a most unusual choice for a position which is usually reserved for compliant party hacks. In this capacity he was able to do something that people had talked about for years but no one had been able to pull off.

Ottawa was founded around the Rideau Canal built by the British engineer Colonel John By to give Canada an alternative communication route to the St. Lawrence River between Lake Ontario and Montreal. The canal took five years to complete at great human and financial cost. Thousands died in the mosquito-infested swamps much of it went through, and Colonel By himself died in disgrace for "overspending" on the project. But even in 1832 when it was completed it was quickly recognized as one of the world's engineering wonders linking the new towns of Kingston and Ottawa via canals and wilderness dams with a series of waterways along a 99-mile

route. The Rideau Canal became the means by which the entire eastern part of the province of Ontario was opened to settlement.

But by 1970 the Rideau Canal was regarded as more of an eyesore to Ottawa city council than an asset, and if the federal government hadn't by chance owned it, the city would have long ago drained and paved it over as has happened to other canals in urban areas. Rochester, New York did exactly this to its eternal regret. Many other cities let their canals fester into fetid industrial lagoons. Fullerton had a different idea. He saw the possibilities of turning an eyesore into an asset by creating a recreational corridor around the canal that would attract thousands of people winter and summer. For the winter he proposed a five-mile skateway from Carleton University to Confederation Square in the heart of the city.

The mayor of the day and the city council exercised their usual capacity for vision and complained it would be too expensive to operate. They refused to co-operate. It was rumored this project would cost at least \$50,000! It was clearly a waste of taxpayers' money. The practically inclined complained that it was impossible. How could you flood a rink that large? You'd have to truck the water in from city hydrants and wait until the ice was thick enough to drive trucks on to clear the snow. By that time the winter would be over.

Fullerton found the money from his own budget and said you didn't need to wait for the ice to thicken naturally to get trucks on the ice. He accelerated the freeze process by using small snow blowers to clear the initial snow from the natural ice. He then drilled holes in the ice and began flooding — not by trucking water in but by pumping water up from beneath the ice using small gas compressors dragged on a sleigh. This small equipment very quickly developed a thick layer of ice that could support heavy equipment. Then he rolled the trucks out. In one extraordinary week he had the entire length of the canal from Dow's Lake to the National Arts Center open for skating.

Skating on the canal was an immediate, spectacular hit. On the first weekend 50,000 people came out to use the longest skating rink in the world. Old folks, teenagers, families with babes in arms — there seemed to be no one who was immune to the canal's winter charms.

The effect on the old streetcar neighborhoods like the Glebe, Old Ottawa East and Old Ottawa South which bordered the canal was equally spectacular. It galvanized them almost overnight from has-

beens into places that were interesting. In winter the canal which separated Old Ottawa South from the Glebe and had been regarded as nothing more than an inconvenient ugly ditch was suddenly transformed into something beautiful. To have a house close to the canal in the wintertime suddenly became a desirable thing. For the first time since anyone could remember, house prices along the canal started to climb instead of fall. Families instead of absentee landlords began to buy.

And the Glebe began to shift from a decaying and dismal collection of streets dominated by absentee landlords and police sirens into one of the most valuable pieces of real estate in Canada. Doug Fullerton began this transition with his skateway, but the people who lived there did the rest by investing in the old housing stock. There is an old joke that the most important place in the community is the hardware store because that's where everyone spends their money and time buying equipment and supplies to renovate their old homes.

The principal public schools, First Avenue and Hopewell, were renovated instead of being torn down. When these old schools emerged from behind the construction hoardings they no longer looked like decaying warehouses. First Avenue emerged as a swan, a graceful and welcoming school on the edge of a green park and a small pleasant inlet of the canal. First Avenue became a French Immersion school, which parents decided they liked. Hopewell became a robust and interesting combination of the old and the new next to a busy commercial street. Both schools began to look like the kind of schools where parents wanted to send their children. The welfare rolls began to decline.

At the same time Doug Fullerton was creating his skateway, his chief planner John Leaning had been doing some thinking about how the cut-through traffic in the Glebe could be reduced. The first step was to kill the city's plans to tear down eight blocks of houses and expand Glebe Avenue into six comfortable commuter lanes which he accomplished with an energized community behind him. The second was to close off most of the east-west streets to cut-through traffic by making them exit only. Leaning's plan, which was in part implemented, made it much harder to traverse the community from one side to the other. Cut-through traffic did decrease dramatically, and young people instead of moving out as soon as larger paychecks arrived started to buy the old houses and fix them up.



I disliked the house Patty found for us from the start. It was boring. It had absolutely no panache. You could drive by a million times and never remark on it. It had been built in the 1930s and not changed since. The original owners still lived in one side; their daughter-in-law and grandchildren lived on the other side. We bought the daughter-in-law and grandchildren side. Nothing had been done to the house since it had been built fifty years previously. The basement floor was cracked and decomposing from the spring floods which regularly invaded it. There was no plumbing for a washing machine.

Entering the front door I felt nothing but the creeping panic of being old before my time. Three bedrooms upstairs and bathroom at the head of the stairs; kitchen, dining room and living room downstairs: it resembled the house that I had grown up in. I didn't want to buy it. I didn't want to be old before my time.

Unfortunately for my sense of panache the house had two inescapable virtues. We could afford it and the walls were straight. With me whining all the way to the bank we cobbled together \$5,000 for the down payment and mortgaged ourselves for \$45,000. It was not a happy day for me. I had visions of a long and ugly servitude in the interests of normalcy.

What happened to our house over the next 25 years has become an extension of what has happened to the neighborhood and ultimately much of the Ottawa downtown.

Over the years we found the money to tear the crumbling basement floor up, put a new one down and lay proper drainage tiles around the edges of the house. Suddenly the house didn't flood in the spring; instead the water was swept out to the city storm sewers. We had a dry and useful basement area. The back of our house had a wooden shed leaning against the house; it overlooked an apartment parking lot and Bronson Avenue. The constant stream of cars from Bronson threw an enormous amount of dirt, pollution and noise our way. The previous owners had used the garden area to park their car. I decided we could park the car at the front and buried the gravel with clean earth and planted trees. The idea was to create a tiny urban forest: a solid green mass between our back door and the roar of Bronson Avenue.

I planted a hawthorn and a small McIntosh apple on either side of the back door. Two crab apple trees along one fence line, a magnolia at center stage and then a big basswood right on the fence line so that it would spread its great spatulate leaves over onto the adjacent parking lot. No one was especially happy with me planting all these

trees on a postage-stamp-sized lot because there was no place left for flowers, but I insisted. When you have thousands of cars rolling by a short distance away from your back door you need all the green screen protection you can get, and flowers just won't do it. The small yard at the front was reserved for flowers where they could get the morning sun.

It has turned out well. We now have a small but vital urban forest in the backyard which forms a dense private bower of green all summer long. You can see neither the apartment parking lot nor Bronson Avenue.



I had somehow managed to conserve the old image of the Glebe in my head as it had been when we had first moved in. In my mind it had not much changed since Fullerton had first flooded the canal. It had just been "spruced up." But it is not the same. It has become rich.

Houses on the Glebe's principal avenues now sell for half a million dollars. Bank Street now has "destination stores" like the Gap, and local stores themselves have become "destination stores." Old parking lots have sprouted new and impressive homes. The "loft" apartment, that ubiquitous signal of urban success, has arrived. The front yards of the Glebe's streets are still small, but they are now resplendent with flowers and trees of all sorts. Peer down a Glebe street and you will be struck by how green and leafy a place it seems. The houses behind the gardens gleam instead of sag with new windows, doors, sunny additions, bright porches and so on. The canal is used not just in the winter but all year long — to jog beside, to paddle on, to in-line skate and stroll beside, to contemplate the flowers. The Glebe has become a very desirable address.

The thing I like best about visiting my son's neighborhood in Montreal is that it reminds me of my own youth and of the enduring vitality of the old streetcar neighborhoods. Even battered and poor, they retain a sense of vitality, civility and interest that comforts me with the thought that when we started building cities in North America, we did a lot of things right. Each one of those old neighborhoods has a Rideau Canal in it somewhere. I'm sure that there's one in Avenue du Parc. Perhaps it will be the planting of trees and the creation of some recreational paths that can be used summer and winter. Perhaps it will be nothing more complicated than the replacing of the old sidewalks, narrowing the streets and planting some