

Pleasantly Surprised by Lori Weber

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Before moving to Valois in 1996, I could count on one hand what I knew about the West Island, with Pointe-Claire taking up the pinky. Growing up in Park Extension, with its classic Montreal-style triplexes – complete with twisty iron staircases and massive coal sheds jutting into the back lanes – my overall impression of the West Island could be summed up in one word: bland.

In fact, I only really became aware of its existence when I attended Vanier College and met people who lived there. They spewed out place names like Pierrefonds and Kirkland and Dollard: musical but foreign. They were kids who drove cars, downhill skied, swam on swim-teams and had, for the most part, Anglo-Saxon last names. I, an immigrant's daughter, albeit with a mother whose family is third generation Irish-English Canadian, had little in common with these kids. They were nice but different, and more obviously affluent than I was. I had grown up surrounded by kids from diverse ethnic backgrounds, Greek and Indian and Armenian, kids who spoke English with accents and ate strange food wrapped in tin foil at lunch.

My first foray into Pointe-Claire itself, as a teen, was to drink at places like Naps, the Marina and the Maples Inn. However, as we always drove there at night and as I was never the driver, I was totally unaware of where we actually were. Streets like Sources and Lakeshore and St. John's held little meaning and I could not have located them on map if you'd paid me to do so. They were all just way out there, somewhere on that vast expanse of land known as the West Island. The old cars we piled into spun out along highways that might as well have been taking me to another country.

It was only many years later, after having lived in virtually every neighbourhood in Montreal, as well as in three other provinces, that I found myself contemplating the unthinkable: moving to Pointe-Claire. By then I was teaching full-time at John Abbott College, a place we had always referred to as the Country Club in my Cegep days. A colleague in the English Department had invited me to her Valois home one wintry Sunday. I took the commuter train and disembarked at Pointe-Claire Station where she picked me up. After spending the afternoon with her in her quaint old cottage on Coolbreeze Avenue, she took me for a tour of the neighbourhood before I had to catch the train home.

Snow had been falling all day and as we drove around, I marvelled at the beauty of the massive evergreens that stood stately on so many front lawns, their branches draped in blankets of white. *I had heard the West Island had no trees!* Old Valois cottages, each one different, were so charming I wanted to be let inside rooms where soft yellow light spilled out onto the sidewalks. *A friend had told me the West Island had no sidewalks!* I felt like I was in a little country village, taking in the diverse sun-porches, stained-glass windows and gabled roofs. *I had heard that all the homes on the West Island looked exactly the same – square brick and boring!* How wrong I was on all these counts.

As fate would have it, a few months later my daughter's daycare teacher casually mentioned to me that a friend was selling her Valois home. She knew where I worked and wondered if I'd ever thought of moving closer. I *was* getting tired of the long commute. Some days it took me ninety minutes to get home from picking up my daughter at school. I was worn out, longing for less time on buses and metros. So, one afternoon we drove out to look at this Valois home. I fell in love with it the minute we drove up to the curb. It looked just like the houses that had charmed me that wintry day. It did not have a pine tree, but it had a birch, a maple, a cherry and a horse chestnut tree in the front. A long sun-porch crossed the entire front and I could already see myself sitting inside, curled up with a good book in a comfy chair, watching the birds pick the drying cherries from the branches. The house, an old cottage whose original Westmount inhabitant had used it as a summer home, had all the original wood trimmings and a built-in China cabinet that still fills me (and all my female friends) with delight.

Now, fifteen years later, I have never looked back. Valois is a warm and friendly neighbourhood where people say hello when they pass each other on the street, in a way that reminds me of my father's village in southern Germany. And, although I don't know all my neighbours by name, we recognize each other from the pool and the grocery store, and always smile and nod, even when I meet them in odd places, like hiking in Maine. Living in Valois connects us in a way that I never felt connected when I lived in Snowdon or the Plateau, more anonymous areas where people come and go. It's like we share a secret, the secret of the quality of life this neighbourhood offers.

The West Island, I now realize, is more diverse than I expected. It's not the white-bread mono-chromatic non-cultural affluent place I had thought it to be when I was younger. It is diverse: culturally, ethnically and economically. I have to admit that I am embarrassed and somewhat ashamed at times of my former poor impressions of it, although I like to put those down to ignorant youth. Those of us who grew up in the city just did not know. We never had any reason to venture into the West Island, unless we had relatives there.

As a writer of books, there is much for me to recommend about Pointe-Claire, including Lac St. Louis, which I can access under the tunnel at the foot of my street. So many key passages in my books have been worked out as I walked along its shore, or stopped to sit and stare at the water in Valois Bay Park, throwing old bread for the ducks and watching the purple martins fly into their majestic home. The lawns of Stewart Hall, where I like to picnic and listen to music in the summer, are picturesque and also inspire plot points and character twists. And the best place for actually editing a text, aside from my dining room table, is the Den, a café with a warm neighbourhood feel and great home-cooking. Best of all, unlike some cafes in the heart of trendier areas, no posing is required. In fact, I can run there in sweatpants and still be forgiven.

Sure, there are times that the city pulls me in. I long for the noise, the chaos, the cafes, the shops, the better films, the mountain, but they are all a short drive or, even better, a short train ride away. I feel like I have the best of both worlds.

My daughter is now at university in St. John's. Recently, she met someone who asked her where she was from. When she said Montreal, he wondered why she had wanted to swap Montreal for St. John's, which, by the way, is a city we lived in and love very much. When she went on to tell him she actually grew up in Pointe-Claire, he said where is that? When she said the West Island, he groaned and said *Oh*. He had lived in Montreal for a while and had heard of it. *Say no more*, he told her, like that said it all. When she told me this, I said tell him he doesn't know it, not all of it. Tell him how wonderful it was to you growing up there, with its parks, pools, and cultural camps, and all the great friends you made who you will probably know for life.

Relax Mom, she said. He wouldn't get it. It doesn't matter.

And she's right. You can't really know a place until you live in it. As for me, I have been pleasantly surprised for fifteen years now and will probably continue to be surprised for many more. My husband, who grew up in Lachine and had no resistance to the idea of moving out here, is not keen to sell up and move back to the city. He is too used to the peace, as am I.

Still, don't fault me if every now and then I find I have to jump on the train and spend the day roaming around rue Sainte-Catherine or Boulevard Saint-Laurent. You know the cliché about taking the girl out of the city

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