

This regular column provides a forum for the exchange of viewpoints and ideas among readers.

"The King of Stanley Street"

Luigi Scarpini came to Canada the day before I was born, but I didn't meet him until the day I arrived in Montreal to study at McGill. When we were introduced he said, "Enchanté," but it was I who was enchanted to meet a genuine Montreal character. Although he was a painter, bohemianism was his true claim to fame, for it was easier to find art in the way he lived than on his canvasses.

The last time I saw Scarpini, who for more than twenty years was a friend of many in the McGill community, was in the fall of 1982 while he was holding court at a table in the Coffee Mill Restaurant on Mountain Street. At fifty-four, his golden locks were greying at the temples and he had developed a bit of a paunch despite his frugal diet. The signs of age reflected the uneasiness of a man who was finding it increasingly difficult to reconcile his romantic conception of himself with the realities of an ever-changing world.

At the age of twenty, Scarpini left his birthplace of Perugia, Italy, to spend ten years "hitch-hiking in and out of Paris." He liked to tell stories about his alleged encounters with the famous—and the soon to be famous. On an Oslo street, went one tale, he was so taken by the striking beauty of a young woman that he told her, "Someday you will be star." She was, he said, Liv Ullman. It was in Oslo that he began to paint. But when offered the chance to cross the Atlantic on a Norwegian ocean liner, Scarpini seized it.

Within hours of arriving in Montreal, he found himself on Stanley Street, then the home of Montreal's artistic and intellectual community, which included the likes of Leonard Cohen and Pierre Trudeau. For most of the next twenty-four years Scarpini was a fixture on the streets and in the cafés of Montreal, earning the title, "King of Stanley Street." He could also be seen walking on the mountain or sunning himself on the lower campus.

His struggles to survive Montreal's legendary winters are chronicled in "The Winter of Luigi Scarpini," a chapter in Don Bell's *Saturday Night at the Bagel Factory*. Bell writes, "Somehow this transplanted Italian has been unscratched by the beatnik and hippie movements and remains true to old-style seigneurial bohemianism."

Scarpini's English was candy-coated with an Italian accent, and while his vocabulary was vast, his grammar was broken. He used his peculiar eloquence to detonate an arsenal of anecdotes that grew out of his travels and fertile imagination.

A bit of an urban beachcomber, Scarpini was forever finding souvenirs in other peo-

ple's garbage or in condemned buildings. He kept a collection of slides of the people he befriended in Montreal and of many of the city's now lost buildings. Although the photography was amateurish, it was a beautiful and highly personal collection. Sadly, just as many of the buildings have been torn down, most of the people have moved on. But more than buildings and faces changed for Scarpini. He lamented the shrinking of the Stanley Street artistic community. While it never became possible to walk down a Montreal street with Scarpini and not have him run into someone he knew, most of his old friends began to move in better circles.

Nor were the cafes the same. He no longer went to the Carmen Espresso Restaurant, where he once had his own table, and both the Riviera and the Rosemarie restaurants were long gone. He was unhappy with the changes in the city's social fabric. "People who hung around twenty years ago without class, now live in Westmount with assumed class. Millionaires used to be well-educated gentlemen. The millionaires of today are not gentlemen and they are not even educated," Scarpini used to say. "And this makes a difference to the people who live below them."

In the end, routine was the only thing holding him in Montreal. "Routine is like a virus," he told me. When Scarpini finally left Montreal in 1982, it was largely because the city was no longer affordable. He refused to get a full-time job and it was getting harder to live his chosen lifestyle on the income gained from the occasional house painting job. He used to boast, "I live like a millionaire, but I haven't got a penny." He also said, "The highest degree of pleasure is coming from your intellect. That you have to work on . . . if people give up on that, they are cooked."

A lot of people scoffed at Scarpini's stories, but I believed them the way a child believes a magician. Still, it's hard to accept that he finally left Montreal. Now I wonder where he is and how he's doing. And I think about a conversation we had when I was finishing my final papers at McGill. "You have to decide whether you want to write or study or travel or work," he told me. "I want to be a bohemian like you, Luigi," I replied. "It's a good life," he said. But I wondered if it was true. There seemed to be a sadness in his eyes, reworking his face, coating his voice. It was then that I realized that growing old when you are alone and rootless is terrifying.

TIM FALCONER, BA'81

Suzan Ballmer

