

Dino

by Robert Yarra

Ronald Sauer was a dashing figure when we first met in North Beach, San Francisco, in 1983. A school dropout and autodidact, Ronald was an opinionated polymath who came from humble beginnings, lived by his wits, was often brash and rough around the edges, but was always bold. Possessing keen intelligence, he brought a certain exuberance to any discussion; he was handsome, fit, and strong, and could walk on his hands. Ronald once told me he had never lost a fight while growing up in New York, a boast I myself could never make. He had taught himself French, translated from that language, and also taught himself to play the guitar. He read widely and had a broad knowledge of history and literature, and could recite from memory a prodigious amount of poetry—Rimbaud, Baudelaire, Wallace Stevens being among his favorites. He enjoyed embellishing and, indeed, improving stories, including his recitation of our shared experiences, which I found curious, as I often recalled them quite differently. Ronald was a discerning scavenger, and called himself “the haberdasher” for the denizens of North Beach.

We were two ex-New Yorkers who had escaped that dirty and dangerous city for the paradise of San Francisco, and we shared a love of Bob Dylan, Leonard Cohen, and Phil Ochs, often singing their songs passionately, usually three sheets to the

wind and much more than one toke over the line. Sometimes, Ronald could be a bit shifty, but we were tight, and I gave him plenty of latitude.

I had a job as a lawyer, but I sought Ronald's company after work or whenever I had free time. Ronald, Rosemary Manno, and I were a trio for a long while; we never tired of one another's company. Humor was our great bond. Rosemary gave Ronald the sobriquet, "Ronaldino," which later evolved into "Dino," and that stuck. We often hung out at the pad Ronald shared with Roger Strobel on Varennes Street, where Ronald would hang Roger's cat, Milton, upside down by his legs, swing him around, and yell sweet nothings at him in a sado-masochistic dance while poor Milton hissed and howled.

North Beach was bursting with poetry when I came on the scene. Gregory Corso, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Neeli Cherkovski, Jack Hirschman, Jack Mueller, Ronald Sauer, Rosemary Manno, Marty Matz, Howard Hart, Kirby Doyle, Jack Micheline, Janice Blue, Tommy Thompson, Joie Cook, Paul Landry, Sarah Menefee, Q.R. Hand, and other luminaries read their poems regularly at Freddie Kuh's Spaghetti Factory, the Savoy Tivoli, and at other cool, smoky, bars and cafes. A mostly silent Bob Kaufman still walked the streets, and Philip Lamantia, who lived in the neighborhood, was often spotted there too. It was an exciting time to be alive, but there was trouble in paradise for me. I was living a double life: that of a loving husband, father, homeowner with a mortgage, and a lawyer with my own practice, while also living the Bohemian life with my artist friends— sex, drugs, kicks, booze, poetry, and the literary

discussions I loved. I often used amphetamines to work ten- to twelve-hour days as a successful immigration lawyer, and was, thus, frequently half out of my mind.

One day, I wronged Ronald terribly. My then-wife and I were leaving for New York, and I had brought her valuable family heirlooms to my office, planning to put them in my safety-deposit box the next day. But I forgot, and, when I got back from the trip, the jewels were gone. I immediately suspected Ronald of the theft, as I had given him a key to my office so he could use the copy machine there. Determined to get the jewels back, I cornered Ronald in the Café Greco, pulled back my jacket, showed him the gun I had tucked into my waistband, and demanded the return of the jewelry. I also threatened to have a police captain I knew have his officers rough him up. Ronald started weeping, and said, incongruously, “What if my sister is sick?” and ran out of the café. I took his reaction as an admission of guilt. The next day, however, I learned from a friend that Mike-the-Spike, the local fence, had given Marty Matz and his junkie girlfriend, Tex, \$285 for the jewelry. I searched for Mike, Marty, and Tex, but they had all split the neighborhood. So, the jewels were gone. After I discovered the truth, I ran over to Ronald’s pad, got down on my knees, and begged for his forgiveness—which he graciously bestowed. I’ve thanked him over the years again and again for forgiving me. To this day, I’m abashed at what I did.

One day, shortly after the Berlin Wall had fallen, Ronald, Marcelina (my radiantly beautiful actress girlfriend with whom I shared a gorgeous pad high on a hill in North Beach), and I decided to head to Paris. So, off we went! Ronald snared a cheap hotel, and Marcelina and I crashed at her friend's pad on the Rue Lepic in Montmartre. Ronald knew the "City of Lights" well, spoke French, and we had great fun walking, seeing friends, visiting museums, savoring drinks in bars and cafes, and marveling at the beauty everywhere. However, we were running low on dough, so we took a train to Prague, where we had heard the living was cheap. With only the name and phone number of a friend of a friend, we arrived at the Prague station, bleary-eyed, at dawn, called "Paul," and woke him up to ask whether we could come over. "Bring cigarettes," he yawned in reply. We also brought two bottles of good French wine and the delicious sandwiches Marcelina had made for the train ride—which must have impressed Paul, who invited us to stay with him in his tiny apartment.

Indeed, Prague was very cheap, and we lived well in that jewel of a city. Once, in the metro there, I remember Ronald, looking spiffy in a porkpie hat, impulsively and gracefully sliding down the rail of the longest escalator I had ever seen, and making an elegant leap at the end. Paul, our new friend, impetuously followed suit, but fell off the railing at the bottom, landed on his ass, and then, for days, complained about his aching butt. Eventually, Ronald went off to Vienna, and Marcelina and I made our way back to San Francisco.

Years later, in 2001, my friend Hannelore de Lellis and I arranged for the burial of the ashes of the famous poet, Gregory Corso, in the Cimitero Acattolico, the Protestant Cemetery, in Rome, an event that was widely covered by the Italian press. While reciting Gregory's poem, "For Homer," over his grave, I looked up, and, surprised, saw Ronald's handsome face smiling at me. I had had no idea he would be at the cemetery, or even in Italy. So, together, we explored Rome, a city where I had many friends. Then, we drove to Positano, where I introduced him to Vali Myers, that great artist, and the friend I loved most. We then made our way to Naples, a magnificent ruin of a city, determined to see as much of it as we could, and walking without any destination. We knew its dangerous reputation, but we were unafraid. After all, we were two tough New Yorkers, who had grown up in that crime-infested city, and we joked that Naples had nothing on New York so far as danger was concerned. After a few hours of meandering, and sampling the local wines, we decided to have a bite to eat at an outdoor café in a piazza at the bottom of a hill. After ordering some food and a bottle of wine, Ronald recited from memory some poems by Rimbaud and Baudelaire. Delving deeper into our cups, we waxed nostalgic, fondly recalling the loves of our lives. But, then, suddenly, we saw a young man, panicked, running for his life down the hill—directly towards us. We heard the first shot when he was about twenty feet away, and he fell. Then, a slim man wearing sunglasses, clad all in white and wearing a white hat pulled down low over his face, stood above the downed man, firing four more shots—after which he swiftly walked away. Ronald

and I rushed inside the café, where we saw two young women huddled in a corner, terrified and weeping. Ronald yelled at them, “Lui è morto. Get down!” as we dove behind the bar. After cowering there for a few minutes, we warily walked out of the place and witnessed a scene right out of Greek tragedy. Three women were kneeling beside the corpse, wailing and pulling their hair. Spellbound, we watched them as the unfortunate man’s blood slowly descended the stairs. Then, we heard sirens. Breaking the trance, Ronald tapped me on the shoulder and whispered, “Bobby, we gotta get out of here. We don’t want to be witnesses to an execution.”

We quickly made our way out of the piazza and headed towards the cheap hotel room we were sharing near the train station. We stopped at a small bar along the way and ordered double whiskies to calm our frazzled nerves. Then, just as the drinks were arriving, a boy of about ten rushed through the bar door, shooting toy pistols. Ronald and I panicked—until we realized that those guns weren’t real. We downed the whiskies and hurried back to the safety of our hotel room, where we spent the rest of the evening silently writing in our journals. Then, sometime during the night, we slunk out of the hotel for a meal at a cheap restaurant nearby, always keeping our eyes open for danger. We caught the first train out of Naples to Rome the next morning. Two tough New Yorkers, indeed!

I was so happy when Ronald and Rebecca Peters found each other, as I had endured years of complaints from him about all his previous girlfriends. Finally, it seemed, he had found the

right one. There was a deep love between them, and he was happier than I had ever seen him.

When the cancer came, Ronald was, as always, brave, and endured the chemo and radiation without complaint. A lover of life, he did his best to make the most of his remaining time. He and Rebecca still entertained in her romantic North Beach pad. As always, we sang—Dylan, Cohen, and Ochs—perhaps even louder than before, since we knew the end was approaching.

The last time I saw Ronald, it was about two weeks before he left the planet. His skin had a dark hue; he looked sadly cadaverous. As we sang, I watched as Ronald and Rebecca gazed into each other's eyes with as fierce a look of love as I have ever seen—a memory that will remain with me forever.

Bless you, dear Ronald, dear friend, for gracing me with your friendship and for bringing so much joy into my life. This book is my love letter to you.