

Irishwoman's Diary, Irish Times, Monday 27 Sept., 2004

By Alannah Hopkin

"I love the guy, I'd loved him anyway for years...he was the coolest, sexiest man I think I've ever met in my life." Dave Fanning, Rattlebag, RTE Radio I, 20.09.04, 70th birthday tribute to Leonard Cohen

So that's all right then, it's okay to love Leonard Cohen, it's cool, he's cool, Dave Fanning said so on the radio. Somehow it's different when a man says it. I don't think I could go on radio and say I love Leonard Cohen. It's hard enough to write it down, I don't feel easy about putting it on paper, it seems silly and girlish. But I love the guy, I'd loved him anyway for years...he was the coolest, sexiest man I've ever met in my life. Definitely.

I must have met him in the same London hotel as Dave Fanning, which he describes as 'not your typical rock and roll hotel'. It was the Montcalm, near Marble Arch, a forerunner of today's boutique hotels, quiet, understated, very Leonard Cohen, in fact.

I say I met him, but I should really have written that in inverted commas, I 'met' him for my allotted half hour of celebrity interview. I decided I would ask him about his writing, even though he was in town to promote a new album, Recent Songs (1979) and was playing the Hammersmith Odeon.

He'd started out as a poet, and published two novels, of which I'd read Beautiful Losers, which was terrible. So was the poetry, probably he published all the stuff that didn't work as songs.

Another reason I wanted to talk to Leonard Cohen, was because I knew his cousin, Edgar Cohen. He was a very respectable Montreal businessman, with lovely old-fashioned manners, a widower, and much older than me, far too old to consider having an affair with.

Well, yes, I admit it, the main reason I went out with him was that he was Leonard's cousin. I'm not sure how he convinced me that he was telling the truth; he didn't have to; you took one look at Edgar, and you knew he wouldn't tell that sort of lie. Possibly Montreal is full of handsome Jewish men called Cohen who have realised they're on to a good thing by claiming to be Leonard's cousin, but that would not be Edgar's style. For a start, he didn't claim close friendship with his famous cousin: "He is my first cousin, but as you can see, I am much older than he is, and our paths do not cross very often."

I met Edgar when London PEN was hosting an international conference. He had written a book, a historical study of Marie Antoinette, or was it one of her contemporaries?

A year later he invited me to attend the next PEN conference in Bled, a lakeside resort near Ljubljana, which was then in Tito's Yugoslavia, as his guest. He made the terms of his offer quite clear: he would pay for my plane tickets, my (separate) hotel room, my conference registration and any outings we went on, in return for my company.

I remember having qualms, sitting on the tube on my way out to the airport. Was I being too naïve and trusting? How could I know he was a man of his word? Well, I knew because he was Edgar. And I was right.

The problem I had in Bled did not come from Edgar; I acquired an admirer, a poet who worked as a TV producer in Skopje. Unlike the London delegation, who knew how Edgar and I had met, and thought it was jolly decent of him to have invited me to Bled, the man from Skopje (I have forgotten his name) totally misread me and Edgar. He assumed I was Edgar's lover, but was only with him for his money, and what I really needed was a steamy affair with a poet from Skopje. One night he was so persistent that, irony of ironies, I ended up taking refuge in Edgar's bedroom, sitting on one of the twin beds, talking the night away. It was the only place in the whole hotel where I felt safe from my pursuer.

When I 'met' Leonard Cohen, I told him that I was a friend of his cousin Edgar. I thought that, and the questions about his writing, would make me stand out among the stream of journalists that he was 'meeting' that day. It was the right thing to say; the dazed look worn by those who submit to the celebrity interview circuit disappeared, and Leonard smiled warmly. 'How is cousin Edgar? He's a nice guy. I haven't seen him in years.'

Later that night, back in my Soho apartment, I remember sitting at the desk which I had painted red to encourage living dangerously and writing dangerously, and by nine o'clock I had drunk a whole bottle of wine. Normally I never drink when I'm writing. I was, to be honest, dreaming, not working.

I looked at my red desk, and I thought why not? Let's give it a try. I dialled the number of the Montcalm Hotel and asked to speak to Leonard Cohen. I was put straight through to his room. The coolest, sexiest man in the world was sitting alone in his London hotel room. Would he like me to come over and keep him company? "Ah, no thanks, I like to be alone. It's a beautiful thought, but I like to be alone."